A FRIEND of the SEMINOLE

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A Friend of the Seminole

By GEORGE ETHELBERT WALSH

Author of "The Mysterious Beacon Light."

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CHAPTER I.

IT WAS early morning in the great Cypress Swamp of southern Florida, and the thickly-wooded lowlands were alive with birds. Gaudy paroquets chattered in the dense thickets, brilliantly plumaged ibises and flamingoes waded in stately procession in the wide bayous and lagoons; ivory-billed woodpeckers tapped the loose bark of decaying trees; snake-birds, bitterns and limpkins thronged the muddy streams in quarrelsome flocks.

Close by a sluggish brook, a hastily constructed camp marked the presence of the only human life in the swamp. From the dying embers of the campfire curly wreaths of smoke rose upward and vanished in thin vapor among the leaves of the trees. A boy of sixteen crouched over a fallen cypress log which protruded far out into the water. Near by in a thicket, the bushy head of another boy scarcely a year older than the first, bobbed up and down as if the owner was excitedly going through some pantomimic exercise.

The morning sun spreading its rays through the dense foliage cast sharp shadows underneath. Its welcoming light brought the full-throated chorus of the semi-tropical birds into sudden peans of joy. As if by magic, bullfinches, nonpareils, cardinals and mocking-birds flashed upon the scene, and began preening their feathers to welcome the dawn of a new day. It was a scene to stir the heart to song and praise for the mere joy of living in such a wondrous world of beautiful things.

The two youths paused a moment in their work and glanced around at the magic scene. Then the older of the two, extricating himself from the thicket of dense cypress bushes and scrubby oak, exclaimed in an excited voice:

"Somebody has been moving the stakes, Otto. They were taken away in the night while we slept. The men must have been within a dozen yards of our camp, and we didn't hear them."

The young fisherman on the cypress log raised his head, and slowly pulled up a string of catfish that he had caught with line and hook. In a voice that did not betray much interest, he asked:

"Did you see their tracks?"

"No-o," was the hesitating response. "I found one stake gone, and then I hurried back to tell you. But I suppose we can easily find the tracks in the soft mud."

Otto wound up his fishing line and scrambled along the fat sides of the log until he reached solid ground. Flinging his string of fish near the dying campfire, he replied:

"Then let's be after them. We may strike their trail and catch them."

"If I do, I'll teach them a lesson! It's a contemptible piece of work."

As they made their way through the underbrush, Weston Winthrop continued excitedly: "The stake was right on the edge of the stream. I remember it particularly, because we cleaned the fish near it last night. I suspected something was wrong, and, in looking around in the underbrush, I found the stake fifty feet to the right."

Otto smiled, and still showed lack of intense interest in the subject.

"Sure you didn't make a mistake last night?" he asked lazily.

Weston grunted a disgusted reply that could not be interpreted in articulate words. Then he continued: "We'll find the other stakes moved, too, just as they were last winter, after we finished the survey. Instead of running north and south, the line will run east and west, or at right angles to either course."

"What does anybody want to do such a foolish thing for?" asked Otto, incredulously. "Unless they have a grudge against your father, I don't see why they should go to so much trouble."

"It's the swamp plume-hunters," returned Weston, emphatically. "They don't want anybody in the swamp to disturb their game. There's been a good deal of talk about passing a law to stop them from shooting the plumage birds in the Everglades, and they're naturally angry at everyone who comes down here to interfere. I suppose they think the survey lines will make it easier for the game officers to stop their cruel work."

They halted on the brink of the stream where the trees and vines had been cleaned away at some time by the surveyor's axe, but young buds and sprouts had already covered the ground again with a carpet of bright green. Looking at the apparently untouched mass of foliage and vines, Otto said with a note of incredulity in his voice:

"Why, there are no tracks here at all, and no signs of any hole where you say the stake stood!"

Weston dropped down on his hands and knees. After a few moments of silent study of the ground, he replied slowly:

"They've been pretty slick. I don't even see a trampled leaf or broken twig. It's strange—very strange!"

"Seems to me," drawled Otto, "that you're the victim of a bad dream. That supper of fried catfish didn't agree with you, Weston."

Weston knelt silently on the ground, and shook his head slowly. He was unconvinced of his error, but he was puzzled.

"We'll pace it off with the other stakes, and take the course from the sun and compass," he announced finally, rising and preparing to execute this decision.

"Which will prove to your doubting mind that you're mistaken," cheerfully interposed Otto. "I've heard of hunters getting turned around in the woods so they couldn't tell north from south, or east from west. Say, cousin, in which direction does the sun rise?"

Weston was too busily engaged in determining the exact position of the stake by the other line of the survey to heed this chaffing. Otto, dogging his heels, counted with him the paces.

"One, two, three," he said, until twenty were reached. Then he lagged behind, and forgot the number, but Weston continued: "Twenty-one, twenty-two—hello! Now we'll have it!"

Otto instantly forgot the diverting circumstances that had called his mind astray, and demanded, "Well, what have you got? —the plume-hunter and stake-puller?"

"No, but the distance, and—yes, the hole where the second stake stood. See here now, you doubting Thomas, isn't that a stake-hole, and hasn't it been recently occupied?"

Otto got down lamely on his hands and knees—for he was stiff and sore from long tramping and camping in the damp swamp —and after a minute examination of the ground, he replied solemnly:

"It is certainly a hole in the ground, cousin, and one that may have held a stake within the past year. Yes, there is fresh earth here, and a bent twig there, and a trampled leaf yonder. Truly, cousin, we're on the trail of the miscreant. It only remains for us to follow the scent and demand his life. You lead, and I'll follow—at a distance."

"Come, Otto, try to be serious for a moment," interrupted Weston, a little impatiently. "This is a serious matter for us. It's the same as last winter. Father had just finished the survey and reported to the government when somebody destroyed all of his work by moving the stakes. It was like a Chinese puzzle after that. Stakes that ought to have run north and south were altered so as to run east and west, and it was impossible to guide yourself through the swamp by their aid. Naturally the work had to be done all over again, and here it is being ruined the second time—and right under our noses. I say it is a shame, and I'm not going to stand it! I'm going to camp on the trail of these plume-hunters until I can bring them to justice!"

"In that case count me in with you," replied Otto, suddenly dropping his air of mock-seriousness. "I didn't really understand, cousin. I thought you were half in jest."

"I was never more earnest in my life. I've been thinking the matter out, and if we hurry up we might catch them. They were certainly round our camp last night, and they're following the east and west line of stakes. We should break camp at once, and follow their trail."

"But you say they have covered their trail pretty well," answered Otto, once more studying the ground about the spot where the stake had stood. "Do you think we can track them?"

"Not entirely by their trail," Weston replied, thoughtfully, "but we can by our compass. If they're following the line of the survey our compass will guide us. All we'll have to do is to keep due west, and we'll strike the other stakes and probably those engaged in moving them."

"Then the sooner we get off the better."

"Yes, we'll pack our things at once."

While speaking the two turned and hurried back to their camp. Within a very short time they packed up their few camp utensils and were ready for a hasty departure.

The sun was now well up above the horizon, and its warm rays were causing the swamps to reek and sweat, the moisture rising in fog-like mists that half obscured the sky. The two young hunters followed the higher ridge of ground that divided the low hummocks and separated the winding lagoons one from another.

Weston, the taller of the two, was the natural leader of the expedition by virtue of his expert wood craftsmanship and long life in the Florida swamps. Otto, while slighter and shorter, was not far behind his cousin in endurance, while a certain resourcefulness in emergencies often gave him an advantage.

Weston Winthrop had lived five years in the sunny South, during which time he had explored with his father—a government surveyor—the greater part of the Everglades, the great Cypress Swamp, and the Mangrove swamps that border on Lake Okeechobee and extend to the very edge of the Gulf of Mexico. The almost trackless swamps and hummocks had never before been crossed by a surveyor's chain, and the commission given to Mr. Winthrop to survey and map out the whole unmarked region of Southern Florida was both an important and difficult one. As preliminary to his work, one whole winter had been spent in studying the maps and surveys of those who had preceded him on either coast line, and then two winters had been wasted in hard, exhausting labor in the swamps—wasted, because, as Weston explained to Otto, someone had moved the stakes and cut down the trees "blazed" to guide one through the thickest part of the surveyed swamp.

Otto had been in the state less than a month, his pale face indicating that he was more accustomed to bending over books than to handling a gun in the woods, but he was fast learning the ways of those whose work and pleasures take them continually out of doors in the free air and sunshine. His shoulders had already lost much of their droop, his face had taken on a rich tan of brown, and his eyes were bright with healthy and pleasurable excitement.

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CHAPTER II.

THE swamp deepened in places, descending into low, marshy hollows where one stepped gingerly from one thick palmetto root to another to avoid the pools of water, and the great masses of vines and semi-tropical vegetation obscured the vision so that one could scarcely see a dozen feet ahead. From these low levels, the trail would then lead to higher ridges of solid earth that ran, like the giant ribs of an inert body, across the vast swamp. There was a perceptible change in the character of the trees and vines in these different levels. In the muck of the swamp hollows, the cypress trees grew, often standing knee-deep in water, while on the ridges the pine and black-jack oak flourished. The trailing vines of swamp ivy and the richly-perfumed jasmine, with its abundant yellow flowers, covered the sluggish pools in the former places, while the wild orange and lemon blossoms scented the air and spread a canopy of rich green over the upland sections.

Even the living inhabitants of the swamp divided the land between them, each group staying within its unmarked boundaries, and seldom intruding upon the preserves of the other. The deadly water moccasin coiled slothfully among the watery bogs of the hollows, and the diamond-back rattler guarded the drier regions. The long-legged cranes, and equally ungainly ibises and flamingoes, forsook the upland ridges to wade knee-deep in the lagoons and marshes; but the wild turkey, the mocking-birds, the cardinals, the nonpareils, and the rarer plumaged and songbirds preferred the region of dry, sandy soil where they could run about without wetting their feet.

To Otto, the ever-changing and shifting scenes appealed more than to Weston. At every step some startling novelty of forest conditions was revealed to him. The newness of the strange scenes, and the stranger plants, flowers and birds fascinated him, and he wished to stop and study them. But Weston was a born hunter, and he was now hot on the scent of his quarry. More than once he impatiently answered Otto's questions, and finally blurted out:

"Come, come, don't stop to talk to every lizard you see, or to botanize. This isn't one of your school excursions. We're after somebody who may give us trouble before we're through, and we want all our wits about us."

"Then you intend to fight if you find him?"

"I'm going to make him go back to Fort Myers with me," stubbornly replied Weston. "He's just as guilty of a crime as if he had broken into father's house and robbed him."

"And if he won't go peacefully?" queried Otto.

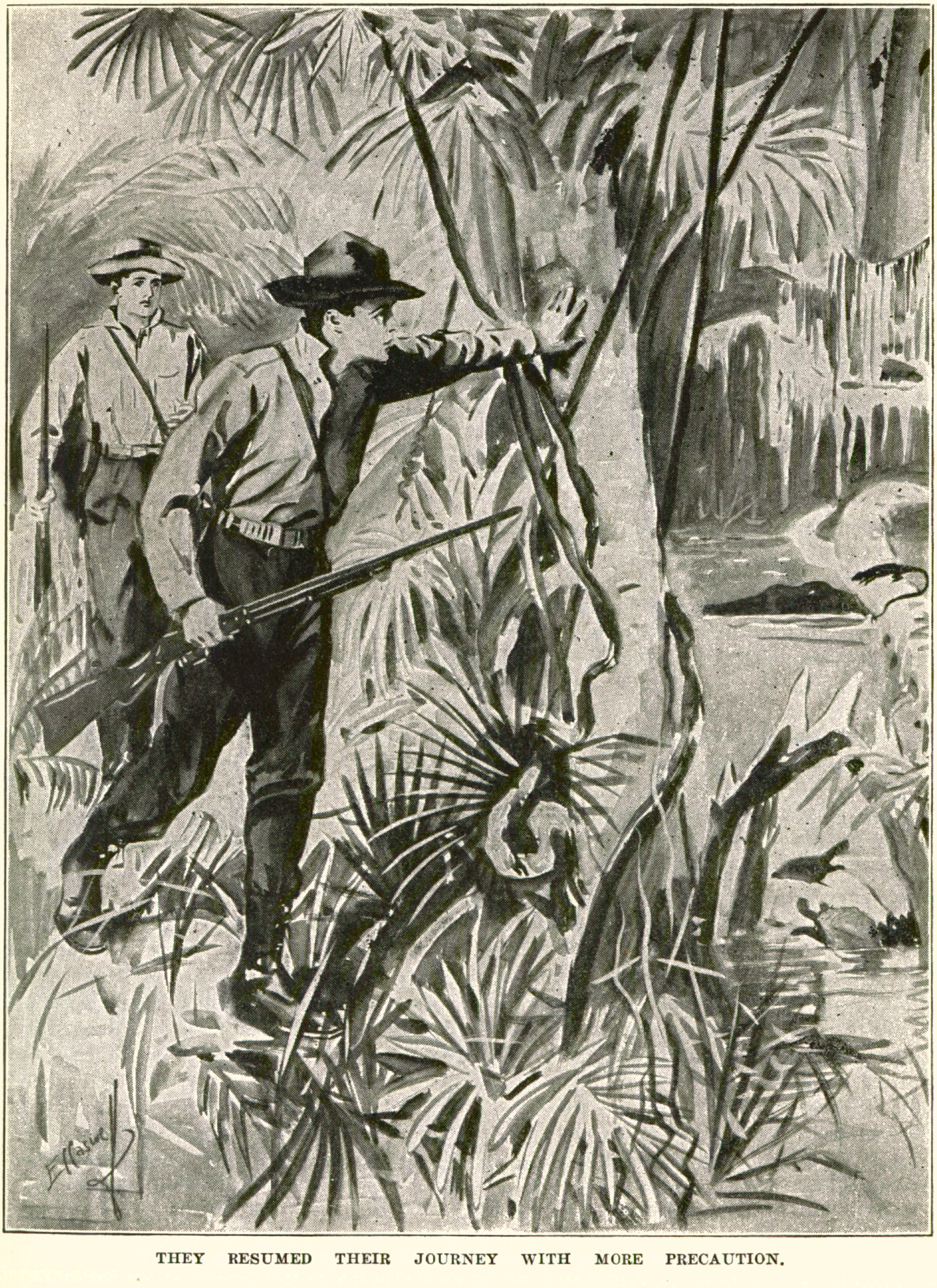
"Then he'll go at the point of my gun."

"But suppose"—replied Otto, with a shrug of his shoulders—"suppose he's armed, and 'gets the drop on you first,' as they say out West?"

"Haven't we two guns between us?"

"Yes—I suppose so," stammered Otto. "But if there are two of them, I don't see that we are much better off."

"Well, we mustn't let them get the drop on us," was Weston's comment. "That's why I'm anxious that you keep your eyes and wits about you. We may need them pretty soon."



THEY RESUMED THEIR JOURNEY WITH MORE PRECAUTION.

They trudged onward for some distance without further conversation. Weston, with his pocket compass in hand, stopped every few moments to be sure of his course, and then he would plunge through the thickets of palmettoes, briers and vines with renewed energy, followed at a short distance by Otto. Their progress was not altogether devoid of noise, for at every few paces they flushed a flock of quail or terrified some old turkey gobbler or plunged almost directly upon a bevy of chattering paroquets. None of these birds sought to conceal their amazement and resentment in quiet, orderly retreat, but on the contrary voiced their anger in shrill voices or loud whirring of wings.

"Pshaw! I believe there are turkey gobblers or quail in every bush," impatiently exclaimed Weston, when they flushed a particularly large and noisy flock of the latter.

"If we were hunting for them," remarked Otto, "I suppose we wouldn't scare one up in half a morning's tramp."

Weston did not answer this remark, for he stood as though suddenly petrified, holding aloft a warning hand. Otto took his cue, and stopped so suddenly that one foot remained half suspended in midair, while the other rested on a bent twig, which he knew when released would fly back with a sharp crack. It seemed to him full ten minutes that his cousin kept him in this uncomfortable attitude of suspense. Then the warning hand dropped slowly, and Weston said:

"I thought I heard something ahead. But it must have been some stray animal or big bird."

"We're coming into the enemy's country now, and we may stumble upon them at any time."

"How do you know all that?"

"By the line of stakes we should find ahead. We're nearly at the end of the old section, and when we come to the boundary, we'll probably find our plume-hunters busily engaged in destroying the survey."

They resumed their journey with more precaution. Weston set the example by treading so softly and carefully on the leaves and sticks that no sound seemed to follow his footsteps. Otto tried in vain to move in the same noiseless fashion, but his feet were constantly striking some twig that sprang up and cracked him in the face, or accidentally snapped like the report of a toy pistol. Weston turned once or twice and scowled. Otto flushed, and muttered back:

"I can't help it, cousin. I'm not a hunter like you."

To make amends for his clumsiness, Otto gradually dropped behind, hoping thus to avoid any trouble through his inexperience and lack of skill. It was difficult to keep pace with Weston under the circumstances, for with the skill of a veteran he seemed to glide through the bushes and place each foot down so lightly that not a dry leaf rustled or a dead branch cracked. The distance between them was increased to something like a score of yards when Otto whistled softly as a signal for his cousin to wait. Almost at the same moment, Weston raised his hand in warning, and then dropped down in the bushes.

Otto disappeared almost as quickly, and the two remained hidden from view for several minutes. Nothing suspicious ahead developed, and, as only the various cries and songs of the swamp inhabitants could be heard, Otto ventured to raise his head a trifle above the clump of saw-palmettoes in front of him. Weston was also restive under the restraint, and was apparently waiting for his cousin to approach. Gradually Otto crawled toward him, picking his way so carefully that he did not once make a leaf or twig crackle. When he reached Weston's side, the latter pointed toward a distant clump of dense vines and bushes, from the top of which something seemed to move.

At one moment it looked like a long leaf vibrating in the soft breeze that blew through the swamp, and again it assumed the shape and color of a handsome bird of paradise swaying from some branch of a tree. Finally Weston recognized the object as that of a long plume of an osprey.

"Only a bird after all?" queried Otto, in a low voice.

"It's only a plume," Weston replied softly, "but it looks suspicious—very suspicious."

"How can a feather look suspicious?"

"Why, for instance—there, it has disappeared!"

For a second it was lost to sight, and then it reappeared and once more bobbed up and down. There was something strangely fascinating about the plume which made both boys watch in silence. Otto finally whispered:

"What are you suspicious about, cousin?"

"I think," answered Weston, slowly, "yes, I'm sure, it is a plume stuck in the hat or cap of somebody."

"Oh!" exclaimed Otto, instantly recognizing the possibilities of trouble ahead, and realizing now the need of caution.

"It's a swamp plume-hunter, or I'm—" began Weston, carefully fingering his gun. Then instantly he broke off in the middle of his sentence to look more closely.

The plume had suddenly jumped up above the top line of bushes, and the dark head of the wearer could be distinctly seen. Weston took one glance, and appeared to raise his rifle to shoot; but Otto in his haste to rise stepped on a twig that snapped sharply.

The loud, penetrating noise acted like magic on the wearer of the osprey plume. Both head and plume disappeared. For an instant the two boys hesitated, hoping to see the feather return; but Weston, with a sudden grunt of anger, broke cover, and rushed hurriedly toward the thicket of dense bushes and palms.

When they reached the scene where the osprey plume and strange black head had been seen, they searched eagerly every corner of the thicket, poking their guns under the heaps of dried leaves, and pushing back the clumps of palmettoes; but there was no sign of anyone there, nor even tracks to corroborate the testimony of their eyes. Weston started off several times on false trails, only to return to the original starting point with a look of disgust written all over his face.

"It's no use, Otto," Weston said in reply to his look of inquiry. "It was an Indian, and you might as well look for a snake in those bushes as for him."

"An Indian!" exclaimed Otto, rising from the ground.

"Yes, one of the Seminoles. They live in the swamp down among the sandy islands or keys of the Everglades."

"Then he wasn't our man, after all?"

"I don't know yet. I'm trying to think it out. It's a new clue."

CHAPTER III.

WESTON stood against the cypress tree for a long time. Otto grew restless and impatient under the prolonged silence of his cousin, and, after failing to attract his attention by snapping viciously with his stick at the head of a tall reed-grass, he blurted out:

"I wish you'd do some of your thinking out loud."

Weston turned his head and smiled; but his thoughts were still far away, and not directly concerned with the welfare of his companion.

"Of course, you can hold up that tree all the morning if you want to," Otto continued, "but I'm not going to stand here to watch you. I'm going to hunt Indians or plume-hunters."

"No, you're not," his cousin replied suddenly, rousing himself from his abstractions. "You're going to help me solve this puzzle."

"Then give me a hint of what you're thinking about. What has this Seminole Indian's presence here to do with the matter, anyway?"

"A good deal. The fact is, Otto, I don't think the swamp plume-hunters moved the stakes after all."

"Well!" exclaimed Otto, with long-drawn breath. "What's happened to change your mind? You think this Indian was moving the stakes?"

"Yes, I do, and I'm going to find out for sure before I do anything else. Then I'll know how to act."

"What object could the Indians have in pulling up the stakes and moving them to some other place? Besides, how could they run them in straight lines without a compass?"

"You don't understand the cunning of the Seminoles, if you think they couldn't do that! Why, they could draw a straight line through the worst part of this swamp, and never look at the sun to guide them. They could find any trail in the Everglades with eyes closed. And no one except an Indian can conceal footprints in this swamp so that a white man can't trail him. They know these swamps and Everglades as we know our own homes."

"But why should they want to touch the stakes?" asked Otto again.

"That's the question that's puzzled me, but now I think I can explain it," Weston answered slowly. "The Seminoles haven't any particular reason to love the white men, and they're very suspicious of anyone who hunts in these swamps. Only the plume-hunters and swamp-traders have made friends with them, and even they cannot always induce the Indians to trust them. Their villages are located somewhere in the heart of the 'Glades and they try to keep them secret from the white hunters.

"You remember, the United States soldiers were sent down to Florida to conquer the Seminoles when they refused to be moved to another part of the country. They didn't want to leave the homes of their ancestors, and they retreated into the swamps. The soldiers tried to follow them, but they got pretty well tangled up in here, I guess."

"I should think they might," remarked Otto, looking at the thickets and lagoons of the great swamp. "A regiment of soldiers would be about as much out of place here as a chicken in a duck pond."

"They were," Weston responded. "They couldn't do anything with the enemy. The Indians retreated, and fought from behind trees and clumps of palmettoes until the soldiers were desperate. After fighting for some time in the woods, a retreat was ordered, and the Indians were allowed to hold possession of the 'Glades. No white man could follow them to their secret hiding-places. I guess they're the only tribe of Indians that have never been conquered by our people."

"They ought to be pretty proud of that fact," said Otto, with a little ring of resentment in his voice, "for they can boast of what much larger tribes never could do."

"Yes, but it's the conditions of the 'Glades, and not so much their courage, that saved them," replied Weston, with a smile. "Well, they've been living in the swamps ever since. They're peaceful enough, and don't bother anybody. But they're suspicious—very suspicious. I think they have reason for it, too. Their old chief was captured while attending a conference under a flag of truce, and imprisoned. He wasn't maltreated, but he died in prison, and that's enough for the Indians. They can't forget that. No explanation explains to them. It was a fatal blunder on the part of the soldiers.

"There was another attempt made to conquer them, I believe, and the government ordered the agents to remove them from their hunting grounds to a reservation allotted to them. But the Seminoles were plucky and determined. They fought again, and retreated further into the Everglades, and for a time practically vanished. That's why you'll find on the records of the War Department the statement that the Florida Seminoles are an extinct tribe of Indians. Oh, well, there are some eight hundred of them down here, and they have five villages—one at Okeechobee, another at Cow Creek, a third at Big Cypress, a fourth at Miami, and a fifth at New River. These villages are known, and other smaller detachments may be located somewhere in the swamps."

"Have you ever visited one?" interrupted Otto.

"No, but I'm going to," replied Weston. "I'm going to visit every one, if necessary."

"When, and why?"

"Right away. I'm going to find out why they're moving these survey stakes."

"You think they are the guilty ones, then?"

"I know it now. It's strange that it didn't occur to father or me before."

Otto once more seated himself on the ground and asked for further information.

"You have still left my first question unanswered," he said. "Why should the Indians move the stakes?"

"Because they are suspicious of them. They don't understand their meaning. They know that they were put here by the white men. They have probably watched us surveying the swamp with our instruments, and then saw us drive the stakes in the ground and cut the bark from the trees to mark the way through the woods. What is more simple than to take these signs as bad omens? How do they know but the soldiers are returning to fight them? It was only a comparatively short time ago that President Cleveland sent a commission down here to help the Indians, and a schoolhouse was erected for them near one of their villages. The Seminoles said nothing, but one morning the agents of the government woke up to find that the Indian village had vanished over night. The schoolhouse was there, but no scholars.

"That will show you how suspicious the Indians are of the whites. They don't trust them. Anything unusual excites their fear, and makes them crafty and wary. So when they saw our stakes in the woods they simply moved them to other places. They thought they were intended to guide the soldiers through the swamps. By moving them they could mix the soldiers up. Isn't that a natural explanation?"

"It seems so," replied Otto slowly. "But if that's the case, I should think you had a harder task ahead than if the plume-hunters were the guilty ones.

"Yes, you're right," answered Weston, slowly. "I don't think it would do much good to appeal to the authorities at Fort Myers; I'm going to appeal directly to the Indians."

Otto looked incredulous, and whistled softly.

"Don't you think you'd better catch your Indians first?" he said, with a laugh. "You just said they were the most elusive things down in these swamps."

"So they are, but even Indians can't hide a whole village at an hour's notice. I'm going to hunt for their chief in his village, and explain to him that this survey means no harm to his people."

"Who is the Seminole chief?" asked Otto, with increasing interest.

"There is no big chief who has absolute authority over all the Indians," explained Weston. "Osceola was their last great chief, the one who died in prison after being treacherously captured. Billy Bowlegs descended from Osceola, and he has more authority than anyone living among them to-day. When he dies there will probably be no chief to succeed him. The five villages select a member to attend the council of chiefs, and these select their head man, who is leader for that time."

"Then Billy Bowlegs is the Indian you want to see?"

"Yes, and I'm going to start out at once to find him. They have their 'Green Corn

Dance' this month, and we'll find Billy Bowlegs there.

"Where is the dance held?"

"That I don't know," responded Weston, with a dubious shake of the head. "It will be at one of the five villages, but which one I don't know. We must find out. Now this Indian we just frightened away from here could tell us if we could catch him, and—"

"And persuade him to tell," interrupted Otto.

"Yes, persuade or bribe him to tell. A few worthless trinkets will go a long way, sometimes, toward making them open their mouths."

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CHAPTER IV.

THE two boys had been hunting on the edge of the big Cypress Swamp not far from the Caloosahatchie River when these incidents occurred. Mr. Winthrop had been called to Washington on business concerning the surveys which he had undertaken for the government, and the two cousins, left alone to their own devices, had decided upon a week's hunting trip in the swamp. They worked their way up the Caloosahatchie in light boats, and after securing these in a good hiding-place, they penetrated deep into the great cypress swamp.

They were still on the northern edge of it where the land slopes gradually toward the river. This section had been the most difficult to survey, and Mr. Winthrop had repeatedly assured his son that he could never repair the damages if the plume-hunters or other vandals moved the stakes the second time.

"You see, father has received nothing for his two winters' work," Weston explained to Otto, as they turned their footsteps toward the hiding-place of their boats, "and this will ruin him. The government won't make any payments on the survey until it is finished and the maps accurately made. A survey without any sign-posts or stakes is about as worthless as a wagon without wheels."

"And a survey with wrong sign-posts, I suppose, is even worse than none at all," replied Otto.

"Yes, much worse, for it gets father in trouble. It makes the inspectors who go over the survey think he doesn't understand his business. Last winter when he reported his survey finished, it was examined by inspectors sent down here, and they found the stakes and numbers of the sections all mixed up. Father spent a fortnight in convincing them that the work had been tampered with. I don't know whether he could explain it satisfactorily the second time."

They had reached an open lagoon that gleamed in the sunlight, when Otto exclaimed:

"Wait a minute, Weston!"

Pointing toward the densely-clothed banks of the water, Otto continued when his cousin stopped: "Did you ever see such a sight? Look at those cranes and ibises! Aren't they handsome creatures? And there comes a scarlet-clad flamingo!"

Weston, in spite of his absorption, smiled at the admiration of his cousin, and stopped long enough to permit him to enjoy the scene.

"What a place this is!" continued Otto, carried away by the exquisite view and the troop of birds wading in the muddy water. "It's better than a menagerie. The swamp is full of rare birds, and they don't seem to be afraid of us, either."

"No," answered Weston, slowly, "but for all that they are not exactly happy. They're all looking out for danger. The big birds and animals are preying upon the smaller ones most of the time. If you'll listen to the songs in the swamp, you'll hear a good many screams that don't indicate much pleasure. I don't think animal and bird life is held very high down here. It's the crowded quarter of bird land. It's a city for them, but they don't have equitable laws. Might makes right in the swamp, and—now look at that big alligator! He's on the hunt for some food."

Gliding quietly, and scarcely perceptibly, across the lagoon was a big saurian, with only his snout visible above the smooth surface. It was evident to the two watchers that he was approaching the silent birds by a series of roundabout circles. Either the birds were oblivious of their danger, or they despised the clumsy creature creeping so slowly but surely upon them.

Otto watched the development of the tragedy with fascinated eyes, while back of him a few paces Weston stood in apparent abstraction. Suddenly Otto started and exclaimed:

"I'm going to save those birds from a horrible death! Hand me my gun, Weston, and I'll scare them away!"

Otto, carrying his gun in his hand, ran around the edge of the lagoon until he could get a better view of the birds. He stopped in the midst of a dense, swampy thicket, and, placing his gun to his shoulders, fired toward the approaching alligator. He knew that the small birdshot would rattle harmlessly on the thick hide of the saurian, but the sharp report of the gun accomplished its purpose.

The flock of cranes and ibises flapped their wings and lifted their ungainly bodies in the air, dragging long, loosely-hung legs behind them like the tail of a kite. The alligator snorted, and with a vicious snap plunged into the depths of the lagoon.

With the flight of the birds, Weston, who had been watching the proceedings, exclaimed, "There, Otto, you've saved them, and hit the alligator! Now come ahead and make for the boats!"

But Otto, instead of replying to this call, suddenly threw up his hands and uttered a cry of distress.

Weston, unable to imagine any cause for such actions, added:

"I'm going on, and you can follow!"

There was no anxiety in his voice, but a moment later when his cousin repeated his sharp exclamation of pain, he stopped and looked inquiringly in his direction. Otto's head disappeared almost simultaneously from view.

"What's the matter, Otto?" shouted Weston, thoroughly aroused and alarmed now by his cousin's queer actions.

He reached the clump of bushes in a few strides. White with anxiety at the unknown trouble ahead, Weston dashed through the thicket and found his cousin lying on his back with a clump of saw-palmettoes serving as a pillow.

"Otto!" he shouted in dismay. "Otto, what is it? What has happened? Speak quick!"

For answer Otto raised himself on an elbow, and, pointing toward the bank of the lagoon, said, "There he goes! Kill him! He bit me!"

There was a flash of something wriggling in the bushes. It seemed like a beautiful kaleidoscopic picture, with flashing bits of colored glasses arranged in symmetrical order, and then with a wriggle it was gone, disappearing among the leaves and moss as mysteriously as it had come.

"It was—" began Otto.

But his sentence was drowned in the sharp report of Weston's gun. Quick as he was to shoot at the disappearing snake, however, the reptile was quicker, and when he stepped forward to look for his victim, there was nothing but shredded twigs and burnt leaves to show how true his aim had been.

"Did you kill him?" asked Otto, in a faint voice. Then seeing the disappointment on his cousin's face, he added: "It was a rattlesnake, Weston. I saw him and heard his rattle; he was in the bushes at my feet when I shot at the alligator. He struck me just as I pulled the trigger."

"Are you sure it was a rattler?" asked Weston, his own face as white as that of his cousin.

"Where did he strike you?"

"Here on my leg," replied the prostrate boy. "It's swelling now, and turning black."

The sight of the dark swelling brought to Otto for the first time a full realization of his great peril. To be bitten by the deadly diamond-back rattler in the heart of the Florida 'Glades, with no possible medical help within many miles, was an experience sufficient to frighten a much older and wiser person. Even Weston felt his own resourceful mind suddenly made weak and helpless. What could he do beyond making a torniquet with his handkerchief above the bite to keep the poison from spreading upward? With swift, skillful hands he wrapped the handkerchief around the rapidly swelling leg, and then twisting it with a stick until Otto winced he held the bandage there an instant while he inspected the wound.

There were two slight, reddish incisions below the knee to show where the rattler's venom had entered the blood, and all round them the flesh was discolored. While Weston gazed, he could see the leg swell, and even above his tourniquet the skin slowly assumed a darker appearance.

"Does it hurt much, Otto?" he asked in a whisper.

"Yes, but the leg is getting numb. I—I think I'm going to faint, Weston."

"You mustn't, cousin," almost shouted Weston. "You must fight it off. It's the poison, and it will never do."

The white face frightened him, and he shook his cousin fiercely, striving to throw off the drowsy, faint spell.

"You must get up and walk around, Otto!" he exclaimed. "Come, try to get up! I'll help you."

With great difficulty Otto raised himself on his strong leg, and, leaning on his cousin, he tried to hobble along. Each step, however, made him wince and groan with pain. The wounded leg was nearly double its normal size, and there was little doubt in either mind that the poison was doing its duty. The swelling continued to increase, working upward until the knee lost all shape, and was nearly double the girth of the lower part of the thigh.

"I don't seem to have any feeling in that foot," Otto said finally. "It's only in the upper part of the leg that it pains."

"But you have no pain in the body yet?" Weston asked fearfully.

"I'm beginning to have queer feelings down here on my left side," answered Otto, slowly.

Fortunately his cousin's face was turned from him, and he could not see the spasmodic twitch of the lips. Weston, realizing that the worst was to be expected, had turned a shade pale, and with difficulty he withheld a groan that sprang to his lips.

"Do you think it is very dangerous?" asked Otto, stopping a moment to rest.

"I—I hope not," responded Weston, hesitatingly. "We'll hope for the best. Are you quite sure it was a rattlesnake?"

"Yes, and he was as big round as my arm. He would make a fine stuffed specimen. I wish—"

"What is it?" demanded Weston, as he stopped and gasped as for breath.

"A pain in my stomach. I think I must rest, Weston. I'm faint again. I don't think I can take another step."

"No, no, you must not stop," replied Weston. "We must fight this off, Otto. It is dangerous. It's no use trying to deceive ourselves. A rattlesnake's bite is nearly always fatal."

"Is it so bad as that?" gasped Otto. "Don't they often recover?"

"I've heard of the Indians curing the bite. They seem to have some medicine made of the leaves of swamp plants which counteracts the poison. But that may be mere talk. I don't know. I wish we had someone here to help us."

As if to answer this desire, a tall, dark form, barbarically ornamented with feathers and fancifully strung rows of alligator's teeth, suddenly rose out of the bushes directly ahead and stood with folded arms awaiting them. A long waving plume of the osprey adorned his head-dress, and both boys were sure that it was the Indian they had observed earlier in the day.

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CHAPTER V.

WHETHER the strong, athletic Seminole was there to intercept them for evil purposes, or simply bent on some mission of peace and good-will, neither anxious boy stopped to inquire. With the same thought uppermost in their minds, they hurried forward to greet him in a way that must have surprised his stoical nature. Weston first addressed the Indian, who seemed like a young man, but with the unmistakable tribe adornments of a person of importance.

"My white brother has been bitten by a rattlesnake," he explained in English hoping that the Indian would understand the language which many of the Seminoles spoke in a broken dialect. "He cannot recover unless you help him. Your tribe knows how to save the red men from the poison. Will you not help my white brother?"

The Indian shook his head slowly, folding his hands across his brawny chest. Weston felt his heart sink at the sight, for it indicated that the Seminole did not understand.

"See!" the boy cried, holding Otto's swollen leg in both hands. "See, a snake has bitten him!"

He imitated with his hands the wriggling of a serpent, and closed his fingers on the leg to indicate how the jaws had left their imprint. The Indian nodded his head this time to show that he comprehended; but he offered no assistance.

"Can't you understand?" blurted out the boy finally. "Can't you help me? My cousin will die if you don't do something."

Unmindful of Otto's feelings, Weston had spoken the truth, and, as it dawned slowly upon Otto, the little blood in his cheeks receded, and left him as white as a sheet. The whole horrible tragedy flashed through his mind in an instant. Alone in the great forest, away from friends and relatives, with not even the chance of a decent burial—this was a death he could not face heroically! The tears forced themselves to his eyes in spite of his efforts at self-control.

"Weston, if I should die—" he began, turning toward his cousin.

"You must not—cannot!" exclaimed Weston sharply. "This Seminole must help us. He can do it if he will. I'll make him—bribe him!"

He held up in his hands a beautiful revolver, which his father had presented him with as a birthday present; but, as the Indian showed no movement to accept the proffered offer, he added to it his rifle, then his pearl-handle pocketknife, a match-box of nickel and gold, a ring that he wore on his finger. But it was all to no purpose. The Indian preserved his stoical calm, watching the boys with his beady eyes, and standing as straight as any young sapling of the forest.

For a moment Weston was quiet and thoughtful. Then the blood mounted to his forehead; his eyes flashed, and with an exclamation of anger he raised his rifle.

"Then you shall die with him!" he said firmly. "If you won't help my cousin, I'll send a bullet through your brain!"

He leveled the rifle with the muzzle close to the Indian's head. The Seminole's own rifle stood near a tree a few feet back of him. He turned once as if to reach for it, but a warning cry from Weston made him desist. With calm indifference, the savage faced the deadly weapon pointed at him.

"Will you do it or not?" demanded Weston. "I believe you understand English and speak it; but you don't want to let us know it. Well, I'll shoot you the instant Otto swoons. I won't wait for his death."

It was a tragic moment—a dramatic scene! The sight of it took Otto's mind from his own danger; he looked from one to the other—one the son of the swamp, a dusky warrior of an almost extinct tribe; the other his cousin, with equal daring and heroism on his face, but less commanding in appearance in spite of his civilized clothing.

Weston grew nervous under the strain. His threat appeared to affect the Indian no more than his bribes and pleadings.

The tension of his nerves were suddenly jarred by a sharp cry of distress from Otto. The pain of his swollen leg had made his quiet reserve unequal to the task of holding back the moan that sprang to his lips. The cry unnerved Weston. He lowered his rifle, and, seeing the pale, strained face of his cousin, he forgot all thoughts of vengeance, and dropped down on his knees by his side.

"What is it, Otto?" he asked. "Has the pain reached the body?"

"Yes, and I'm going to faint, cousin. I can't stand it."

The boys looked into each other's face; their hands clasped, and for a few moments they were silent and oblivious to all else in the swamp. The Seminole was forgotten, and also the birds and animals which swarmed around them in such countless numbers. As in a vision their minds carried them back to two distant homes which would be placed in mourning.

"Otto, I wish I could do something to help you," began Weston, and then his voice faltered.

"See, he's going!" exclaimed the stricken boy, pointing suddenly with one finger at the retreating figure of the Seminole.

"The contemptible cur!" replied Weston, his thoughts returning to their former channel.

"And he's taken our rifles," continued Otto.

Weston was instantly on his feet. The Indian was a dozen yards away, disappearing in the thick clumps of trailing vines and palmettoes. A glance around convinced the boy that their rifles had been removed by the Indian.

"I'll make him pay for this, yet!" he exclaimed, turning and running in the direction of the retreating figure.

"No, no, come back!" exclaimed Otto. "He'll shoot you!"

"But I have my revolver. That'll give a good account of itself."

"But he can lie in wait for you, and shoot you down," protested Otto.

Weston reluctantly abandoned the chase. The Indian had disappeared almost as suddenly and miraculously as he had first come upon the scene.

"It may be, Otto, that the poison will not reach any vital part," Weston said, talking more hopefully. "A good many hunters recover from rattlesnake bite down here just on that account. Some of them say that the bite is not fatal except in the summer season. It may be—"

Otto looked up with a wan smile. He saw through the little deception.

"I'm afraid it's no use, Weston," he replied softly. "It's terrible to think of, but if I must die I'm not going to be a coward. I'd rather know it, and not—"

Weston suddenly dropped his head and sobbed. The calmness of Otto unnerved him more than anything else. To talk thus quietly of death made him realize his helpless position, and in inward rebellion he protested against the fate which had doomed his cousin to such a terrible accident. He had faced danger and death a dozen times before in the swamps; but the risk had always been a part of the life he enjoyed and he had not been terrified by it. Had they been attacked by Indians or wild animals, he could have faced death with calm imperturbability, not wincing once. But this quiet, slow, and sure ebbing away of life brought new sensations to his mind.

He raised his head, rebelliously, and glanced vaguely through the swamp.

Through the thickets he knew that one endless glade opened into another, and that no man could reach the border of civilization in less than two or three days of hard travel. How could he then hope for relief in that direction?

Behind him in the opposite direction stretched the endless vistas of cypress and tall grass, terminating finally in the watery wastes of Okeechobee. Somewhere within that great morass probably lurked Indians or white hunters who could lend him assistance, but how to reach them in time to save Otto burdened his mind with terrible grief and uncertainty. Unmindful of their troubles, the birds trilled and warbled among the trees, and great alligators bellowed forth their hoarse cries to their mates.

The whole swamp—pathless as a wilderness, and as terrible in its loneliness and wild beauty—was untouched by the little tragedy enacted on the bank of the lagoon, and for a moment Weston experienced a sensation of repulsion. It was cruel in its unsympathetic attitude. Even the trees appeared to laugh at him.

From this reverie Weston was suddenly aroused by a movement of his cousin. Opening his eyes wide Otto touched him on the arm, and said:
take the chance."

"See! There's our Seminole again!"

Weston sprang to his feet and turned to confront the straight figure of the swarthy Indian. Not a dozen feet away the man stood in majestic gloom and silence. So natural did he appear that it was hard to believe that he had mysteriously vanished only ten minutes before.

The boys were so surprised by the reappearance of the Indian that they had no words to speak. They stared at him in silence. This time the Indian spoke first. He moved silently until he stood directly over the prostrate figure of Otto. He carried no weapons in his hands and the boys felt no fear.

In a deep guttural voice, the Seminole then said:

"Istahatka holwaugus stah."

Weston, who had picked up a few of the Seminole words in the course of his hunting, tried to interpret the remark. Otto asked curiously:

"What does he say?"

"'White man no good,'" Weston answered slowly, as the Indian's meaning slowly dawned upon him.

From the bosom of his coat, the savage next took a bunch of freshly plucked leaves. Handing these to Otto, he continued:

"Humbugchuscha."

Once more Weston racked his brain to remember where he had heard that word before. A moment later he interpreted:

"Eat plenty."

Otto took the leaves and smelt of them, debating in his mind whether or not to put them in his mouth. They had a strange odor which seemed to nauseate him.

"Humbugchuscha," repeated the Indian.

"Eat them, Otto," Weston said. "He evidently intends to help us. It may be the Indian's cure for snake bite. Eat them."

"But if they should be poisonous?" queried Otto doubtfully.

"They couldn't hurt you any more than the poison of the rattlesnake. We must take the chance."

Without further protest Otto began to chew the leaves. If the odor was offensive, the taste was far more so. The Indian watched him quietly, showing no inclination to move until the last leaf was consumed.

Then he grunted with satisfaction, and kneeling by the side of Otto looked at the swollen leg. Quietly pulling the stalk of a fleshy plant from another part of his dress he proceeded to squeeze this between his fingers. A dark liquid oozed from the fleshy bulb and dripped on the injured leg. Against the blue and purple flesh, the drops of juice appeared crimson in color. Otto and Weston watched the process eagerly and attentively. When the last drop of juice was squeezed from the bulb, the Indian flung it away, and gently rubbed the liquid up and down the leg.

For five minutes he continued this operation in absolute silence, using his fingers deftly to massage the leg and rub the liquid into the skin. Even while he was bathing the swollen limb, the dark hue seemed to disappear, and a light crimson color spread over it. Fascinated by the operation, Weston forgot all else, and it was only when he finally looked up in surprise that he found his cousin's eyes closed.

"Otto, how do you feel?" he asked in alarm.

"Sleepy—very sleepy," was the response. "I think the pain has left me."

At first Weston dreaded lest the drowsiness caused by the poison had overcome his cousin, but a moment later when he saw the reduced swelling, and the swiftly-changing color of the skin, he knew that the Indian's medicine had taken effect.

"You have saved his life!" Weston exclaimed, touching the kneeling Indian on the shoulder. "If I can do anything for you—"

He stopped, for he knew that his words were not understood. The Seminole apparently understood no language other than the wild dialect which he had heard first from his own mother. Weston tried to communicate some of his feelings to the man by sign language; but if the Indian understood he betrayed no indication. He stood a moment longer over his sleeping patient, and then with a grunt of satisfaction turned to leave.

Weston besought him to stay, but the man shook his head, and pointed toward the swamp. In another moment he was stalking away through the woods—a strange, silent phantom of the swamp.

CHAPTER VI.

WESTON watched until the trees shut from view the tall form of the Seminole. When he turned back to his cousin he gave a sigh of relief, for the crisis had apparently passed. Otto was sleeping as peacefully as a child, and the leg had lost much of its swelling, while the skin was rapidly resuming its natural color.

Weston made no articulate exclamation, but in his heart he was breathing a prayer of thankfulness.

Otto slept for the better part of an hour, and then slowly moved in his slumber and stretched his limbs. A moment later he opened his eyes and stared around him. The dreamless sleep left him somewhat bewildered.

"Where am I?" he queried.

Almost instantly his mind recalled the events just transpired, and he sat up with an exclamation.

"Did that Indian save me?" he demanded. "Why, the swelling in my leg has almost disappeared! Where is he?"

"Gone!" answered Weston. "Gone as mysteriously as he appeared."

"And I was sleeping?"

"Like a log, cousin. I never saw you so heavy with sleep."

"I wish he had waited until I could thank him. He saved my life, Weston, and that isn't a small thing. I must find him again."

"Not a very easy thing to do in this swamp. If he wants to hide from you it would be a hard undertaking to find him."

"But why should he hide? He's a noble fellow, and we misjudged him."

"Yes, misjudged him, and threatened to shoot him if he didn't help us," answered Weston musingly. "But I wonder what he did with our guns?"

"Aren't they standing there by the tree?" asked Otto, pointing to where they had formerly stood.

Weston uttered an exclamation of surprise. The two guns were in their place with nothing to indicate that the Indian had removed them.

"I believe this is all a dream," Weston

added after a moment of reflection. " That Indian and our guns appear and disappear like magic. One moment they are here, and the next they are not."

" Well," laughed Otto, " it may seem like a dream to you, but it doesn't to me. That snake bite was pretty real, and that stuff your Seminole gave me to eat was the bitterest thing I ever tasted.

" It was wonderful medicine anyway," Weston said. " It acted like magic—put you asleep out of all pain, and made the swelling disappear in a few minutes."

" I suppose if we knew the prescription we could make a fortune selling it. It was some kind of a swamp leaf that I never saw before."

Otto soon found that he could stand some of his weight on the injured leg, although for several days thereafter it was so numb that he could stick a pin in it without causing much pain. In some miraculous way the herb of the Indian had counteracted the poison of the snake, and the boy's life had thus been saved.

For half an hour they remained seated on the soft bed of leaves and palmetto roots, talking of their plans and Otto's miraculous escape. Weston finally grew restless once more as his mind reverted to his former troublesome question.

" If you feel able to limp along, Otto, I think we should move on," he said. " We should reach our boats before night, and then you can give your leg plenty of rest."

" Are you going to seek the Seminoles in their camp?" Otto asked, as he tried his game leg, and found it quite strong and steady.

" Yes, I'm going further up the Caloosahatchie to see if we can't find a swamp-hunter who can direct us to one of the Indian villages. At any rate, I know there's one at Okeechobee, and we can reach it by boats."

" Well, if all the Seminoles are like the one we've met, I'm not afraid to hunt them up."

" Yes, but remember what this brave said, ' Istahatka holwaugus stah ' (white man no good). I think that is about the opinion they all have of us."

" Then why did he save my life?" asked Otto warmly.

" Didn't you save the life of the flamingoes and ibises when the alligators tried to eat them up?"

Otto looked thoughtful and made no reply.

Weston unpacked their camping outfit, and proceeded to prepare the dinner. The sun was directly overhead, and the swamps were warm and steaming, with the mist rising from a hundred lagoons and pools. The leafy branches of the trees protected the boys from the hot sun, and under their shade they ate their simple meal in comfort and pleasure.

The water was teeming with catfish and sunfish, while an occasional pickerel or carp touched the bait the boys flung temptingly toward them. Game birds of all kinds filled the woods so that food was plenty. Nearly all the fresh water lakes and ponds were clear and cool, furnishing an abundance of drinking water. Only in the bayous and turgid streams was the water thick and muddy, tinged with the decaying wood and earth of the trees and palmetto roots.

Weston was an expert camper. He fried some fish and sweet potatoes—which they had brought with them from their boats—made a cup of strong coffee, and sliced a few pieces of hard, stale bread. With this repast spread, the two young explorers proceeded to enjoy their dinner better than many another would a course dinner at an expensive hotel.

Weston was the first to remember that there was work ahead. Finally starting up from his recumbent position he said:

" Come, Otto, we must be off. We want to reach the river before night. Can you walk?"

" I can limp."

" I'll help you then. I'll pack up these things and be ready in ten minutes."

In an incredibly short space of time, the few camping utensils were in a neat package over Weston's shoulders, and, with his disengaged arm extended to his cousin, he said:

"Now we're off."

Otto walked the first fifteen minutes with only a slight limp, but after that the injured limb began to weaken. By using Weston's arm as a partial support, he continued the journey without much difficulty.

As they proceeded along the trail, which Weston knew almost intuitively, the swamp grew denser and lower, sinking down in places to such muddy depths that they had to struggle quickly to extricate themselves from the mire and water.

"If my game leg gets caught in one of these holes I'm done for," remarked Otto, with a grimace. "I'm not sure but it would be easier to die from snake poison than to strangle to death in one of these mud holes."

"We're getting close to the edge of the river," replied Weston, "and that's why the swamp is so soft and muddy. Keep a good hold of me."

"I wish we could bring the river to us instead of going to it in this dense swamp. I'm faint and weak again."

"Brace up for a few more minutes, and we'll be there," Weston assured him confidently. "I think I see a break in the trees now. Yes, that's the river."

"Suppose you go ahead then, and I'll rest here on this cypress-knee until you find the boats."

"All right. I'll bring them around to this lagoon. You shout if you need me."

Otto crawled to a cypress-knee, which offered a secure resting place above all the dampness. From this slightly elevated position he could watch the woods, and see glimpses of the river between the leafy boughs of the trees and vines.

Weston left their camp traps with Otto while he plunged once more into the swamp. Thus lightened of his load, he sprang forward easily and swiftly from one solid foothold to another. He soon disappeared from view, and Otto turned to a study of the swamp birds which were chattering among the trees and vines.

How long he remained seated on the cypress-knee before he heard any suspicious noise in the distance, he could not very well say, for his active imagination had been busy with other scenes so that the flight of time meant nothing to him. A splash of an oar on the river first attracted his attention. Instantly looking up he caught a glimpse of the boat.

"Hello, Weston!" he exclaimed. "You found the boats all right?"

There was no reply to this call, and the next moment Otto saw the silent boatman push his craft behind a screen of thick vines; but his hasty glimpse satisfied him that it was not Weston. Neither was it the Seminole Indian, who had so recently befriended them. The man was dressed in the ordinary rough clothes of the swamp plume-hunters, with a slouch hat decorated with feathers, and a rough shirt of dark gray.

The appearance of the stranger, and his apparent anxiety to escape as quickly as possible from view, roused suspicion in Otto's mind, and he pulled himself higher upon the cypress-knee to get another sight of the figure. This was impossible, for a thick screen of vines and cypress boughs effectually shut out that portion of the river. The next best thing, Otto decided, was to give the signal to his cousin, and raising his voice he uttered a shrill cry. This signal was answered a few moments later by Weston. They had agreed upon signals so they could communicate with each other intelligibly when separated in the swamp.

Otto replied by imitating the whistle of the southern quail which Weston answered by the shrill hoot of the screech owl. Then came the cry of the whip-poor-will from the cypress-knee, and the plaintive call of the night heron answered. It was their chance to test the success of their signals.

In a few moments he could hear Weston crashing through the bushes, hurrying forward with unnecessary haste. Otto for an instant feared that he had frightened his cousin by giving the alarm, and to dispel his anxiety as soon as possible he shouted:

"Don't hurry, Weston! I'm all right!"

Weston pushed through a glade of swamp reeds and giant ferns, and answered quickly, "But the boats are not all right. Someone has taken yours and stolen half our store of goods from the other."

Otto, remembering the skulking figure in the boat, quickly reached the conclusion that the thief was not far distant.

"I saw him then, cousin!" he said in a loud whisper. "He passed this way not three minutes ago!"

"Which way?"

Otto pointed out the spot, and hastily told of his suspicions when the man made no reply to his call.

"Then we'll catch him before night!" answered Weston. "He's taken nearly all of our goods. You wait here until I get the other boat."

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CHAPTER VII.

WESTON was gone scarcely five minutes this time. Otto heard his paddle strike the water in quick, steady strokes. The boat had been concealed in the bushes only a short distance away, and Weston was an excellent paddler. The craft was not an ordinary Southern flat-bottomed river boat, nor an Indian dug-out, but a dainty Canadian canoe of birch—strong, light, and graceful. It had been shipped from the North as a present from Otto's father, and its mate was now in the possession of the man who had passed up the river. In starting on their adventures up the Caloosahatchie, the two boys had carried their packs in the separate canoes, dividing up the load evenly. The thief had taken Otto's canoe, with all that it contained, and nearly half the contents from Weston's. Evidently it had been his intention to take both boats, but at the last moment he had been surprised by Weston's appearance. The second canoe was floating away several feet from the shore when Weston plunged boldly into the water and secured it.

"Quick, Otto!" the boy now called, twisting the canoe close to the embankment.

They were under way in less time than it takes to tell it. Otto took his position in the stern with one paddle, while Weston steadied the bow. The light canoe shot out into the river and turned upstream in the direction of Lake Okeechobee. The departing sun glinted brightly through the foliage of the trees and lighted up the river in warm, golden hues.

The boys kept their craft close to the edge of the densely-clothed shore, for within its shadows the fleeing thief might hide at any moment and laugh at their efforts to find him. Weston cautioned Otto to study closely every part of the embankment, while with sharp, eagle-like eyes he swept the distances ahead and noted every changing movement of palmetto and cypress bough.

The Caloosahatchie was filled for some distance from the banks with tall, rank-growing saw-grass and reeds. It was an easy matter for a boatman to hide among these tall stalks, and Weston, when they reached a small forest of the grasses, slackened the speed of his canoe. Carefully and cautiously he watched each passing clump of reeds. Some of them were bent and broken by the wind; others were old and had fallen over by their own weight; and a few had been partly destroyed by the nesting and feeding birds. But all these Weston passed without stopping his canoe. When they reached the middle of the tall, thick reeds, he suddenly leaned forward in the canoe for closer inspection of a few broken ones.

"These have been broken down lately," he whispered. "I think our man has disappeared in here. You keep quiet now, and I'll do the paddling, for I may want to stop the canoe at a moment's notice."

The tall reed grass parted easily before the canoe, and Weston made almost noiseless progress. Ahead of him he could see where the reeds had been parted and broken. It was a trail too large for that of an alligator, and it could not be that of a deer or bear, for such animals would not venture so far from the shore in the grass. It was unquestionably made by a boat.

This fact Weston was sure of, and he proceeded with the utmost caution; but careful as he was he did not notice that the trail ahead suddenly turned and almost doubled upon itself. He was so eager in looking ahead that he had no eyes for any other point of the compass. Otto resting contentedly in the stern was less intent upon seeing objects in front, and consequently he saw the ruse of the thief in time. The man in doubling upon his tracks had returned almost within five yards of his inward trail, and he now remained motionless in the reeds, hoping to escape observation. Otto saw him, and gave a little cry of alarm.

The man seeing that discovery was inevitable raised his paddle, and pushed his boat violently through the thick reeds. Then for an instant he turned toward the boys, and deliberately aimed a pistol and shot two or three times. The bullets whistled among the tall grasses, cutting off their heads, but passed harmlessly above the boys. The shots were evidently fired more to frighten than to harm them.

"If you don't want a taste of this keep away from me!" the man shouted. "I'm going to have this boat, and if you follow me I'll shoot both of you."

"Then try some of our shot!" exclaimed Weston angrily, picking up his gun and sending a load of duck-shot rattling through the grass. The man muttered an angry reply, and returned the fire. This time the bullet whistled dangerously near their heads.

"Keep low, Otto!" exclaimed Weston. "He's shooting now to hit!"

Picking up Otto's gun, Weston took good aim again, and shot low this time, directing his charge more against the boat than at the man. The load of heavy duck-shot plowed a lane through the tall grasses, and struck the retreating canoe broadside. Finding that the boys were going to fight stubbornly for possession of the craft, the man headed for the shore. A dense clump of saw-grass hid him from view for an instant, but when he emerged into the open again the attack was renewed. Otto paddled now while Weston directed the aim of the guns.

Two against one was too much, under the circumstances, and the man dropped his pistol, and devoted all of his attention to paddling. With a few desperate strokes he shot the boat into shallow water, and then with a parting oath he jumped overboard and made for the shore. With one last glance at his pursuers he turned and took deliberate aim at them. The bullet whistled close over their heads, and spent itself in the field of nodding reeds.

Weston returned the fire this time with equal determination to do some damage. He did not want to kill, but, aiming at the man's legs, he shot both barrels in quick succession. The shot rattled around the retreating pair of legs, and from the way he danced the boys were sure that some of them had hit their mark.

Before Weston could reload, the man disappeared in the woods, leaving the stolen canoe fast among the reeds. The boys paddled over to it. The heavy shot from Weston's gun had perforated the light birchwood in several places, and it was unsafe to attempt to get into it.

"We'll have to pull her ashore and stop up these holes with cotton rags," Weston said. "It isn't safe to use it now."

"I'm not anxious to go ashore here with that man lurking around," said Otto. "He might make a night attack on us."

"I'm going to camp on the opposite side of the river to-night," Weston replied. "I don't think he'll swim across to bother us. If he does he'll stir up a nice row among the alligators."

"What do you suppose he's doing down here? Is he one of the plume-hunters?"

Weston shook his head negatively. The man's actions and desperate defense of the boat puzzled him. Plume-hunters were not thieves, and they were a class disposed to treat all strangers kindly and generously. His own experience with them had always been pleasant.

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CHAPTER VIII.

THEY crossed the river half a mile further, near it source, and after skirting the shore for some distance they found a favorable spot for their camp. Once toward dusk they heard suspicious sounds in the swamp opposite, and Otto was positive that he saw a canoe glide in the shadow of the embankment and disappear behind the screen of foliage. But as no further sign of the man could be detected, the two boys drew their injured canoe upon the soft bank and tried to patch up the holes made by the heavy charge of shot.

While Weston repaired the craft, Otto fished from the side of the other canoe, hauling in two large bullheads within a few minutes. The river scene was now beautiful and tropical in effect. The sun was slowly disappearing, and the swamp around was already dusky with the shadows of the night. The song birds were trilling their farewell melodies, and the night prowlers were stretching their limbs under the cover of darkness.

From the marshes of the river the frogs and alligators bellowed forth their musical cries, filling the swamp with echoes that made one shudder. The screech of a wildcat, or the loud purring of a panther, occasionally startled the concert of singers. A silent deer stepped carefully and daintily down to the river's edge to quench its thirst, or a lumbering bear lurched through the woods, crashing and stumbling along as if lord of all the swamp, and unmindful of the comfort and happiness of others. Great shadowy bats flew round in pursuit of the myriads of insects that filled the air. Some of them, a foot or more from wing-tip to wing-tip, looked in the semi-darkness like eagles swooping down upon their prey. Great white and brown owls emerged from dark holes in the trees, and flew with noiseless wing from river bank to swamp, playing hide-and-seek with the shadows of the trees, and capturing their prey on the wing with the ease of professional hunters.

Otto lighted the camp fire, and began to fry the fish; but often he stopped in the process to look about. This forest scene was still too new and attractive to forget. In the daytime it was full of strange and wondrous sights, which never lost their fascination; but when dusk shadowed the woods the scene was weird and repulsive.

The smoke of the fire made life more agreeable to the boys by driving off the numerous insects. These floated round in dense clouds. Mosquitoes, red bugs, flies, and even scorpions filled the swamp, and they searched out every nook and corner to find food.

Weston finished repairing the damaged canoe by the light of the camp fire. Then the two boys erected their simple tent—intended to keep off the night dew more than to protect them from rain or wind—and over this they flung mosquito netting.

"I'm tired enough to drop right off to sleep," said Weston, when the sleeping quarters were all arranged.

"So am I," responded Otto, "but I can't sleep here in the swamp as easily as you can, cousin. I lie awake, night after night, thinking of bears and wild-cats."

"And scorpions and rattlesnakes," interrupted Weston jestingly.

"Yes, and swamp thieves, too," added Otto. "I don't know which to dread the most."

"The best way is not to think of any of them," promptly replied Weston. "Wild-cats and bears won't bother us; they're too timid, and besides there's plenty of smaller game for them. The scorpions and rattlesnakes are too wise to go hunting for trouble, and that swamp thief can't get across the river unless he swims. And if he tries that he'll furnish food for the alligators."

"All of which is intended to quiet my fears, and make me go to sleep like a good little boy," responded Otto laughing. "All right, I'll try it."

He turned over and heroically closed his eyes; but sleep did not come to him. The day's occurrence was too vividly pictured in his mind. He lived over again, a dozen times, the terrible fear of the death which he had so narrowly escaped. When he dozed a little he saw visions of snakes crawling and wriggling over him, and Indians, with their war paint on, stalking abroad. He woke with a start, and sat upright.

The night was well advanced. The early chorus of night singers had given place to the songs which generally closed the symphony. Most of the night marauders had found their prey, and were resting in sleepy gluttony. A few belated ones were still on the trail of their victims, an unearthly scream or half-strangled cry indicating occasionally that they were at last successful in their quest.

Even the insects had ceased to hum their monotonous tune, and the batrachians in the river marshes were silent. The mist of the night hung like a pall over everything. Sitting upright in the tent, Otto tried in vain to penetrate it. The river was not visible; it seemed as if it had miraculously disappeared, carrying away with it their two canoes. Through the open flap of the tent, the startled boy stared in bewilderment, wondering if he was dreaming or wide-awake.

Then out of the midst two blazing stars appeared, shining so strangely and fiercely that the boy was fascinated. They were two points of bright light flashing from some unseen source. Their brilliancy alarmed Otto. He rubbed his eyes, and looked again. They were still staring at him—quiet, steady, and remorseless.

It required some time for the awakened boy to realize that they were the eyes of some strange wild beast staring at him from beyond the line of mosquito netting. When he fully appreciated this fact, he felt a cold chill possess him. Nearby Weston was sleeping, calmly and peacefully, unconscious of the presence of any danger. The animal was nearer his cousin, and should he make a leap he would clutch the throat of the sleeping boy before Otto could raise a hand to defend him.

This thought more than any personal fear brought Otto to his senses. Within reaching distance were their two guns, loaded with shot, and ready for instant use. The boy gave one side glance at them, and then his hand moved stealthily toward the nearest. The blazing points of light flickered a little, and a deep growl seemed to come from the very ground. Otto hesitated, withdrawing his hand hastily, and then once more boldly plunged it forward to grasp the gun.

The sudden stir and movement alarmed the animal, for it gave another savage snarl, and the points of light seemed to recede and then approach nearer; but Otto had passed the stage of uncertainty. He was now wide awake, and determined to act. He raised the gun halfway to his shoulder, and exploded it point blank into the face of the animal.

The loud explosion awakened Weston with a yell. Leaping to his feet to find the small night tent filled with smoke, he stood a moment bewildered and confused. Otto had risen also; but before he could offer any word of explanation there was a shriek outside that made the swamp echo with thrills. The wild animal leaped into the air, uttering his piercing cry, and then landed on the top of the small canvas tent.

In a moment the two boys and the wild animal were hopelessly tangled in a snarl of canvas tent, yards of mosquito netting, and flying fur, bark, and leaves. Fortunately the sharp claws of the wild-cat were employed in tearing to shreds the tent and mosquito netting, and only at odd moments did they reach the skin of the boys. Once a dig on the hand made Otto yell with pain, and Weston got one on the back of his neck which made him squirm with fright.

So fierce and violent was the attack of the wounded animal that neither boy had time to extricate himself from the tangle. It seemed about half the time that they were struggling with each other, and the other half vainly striving to untie themselves from the strips of canvas. The ripping and tearing of the tent sounded far more terrible to them than the actuality. The deafening screeches and snarls of the great cat added to the horror of the scene.

Then suddenly, almost as quickly as it had commenced, the struggle ceased. A few despairing cries of the cat were uttered, and the paws stretched and twitched convulsively. The animal had been fatally wounded, and when it lay dead on the ground all was quiet in the swamp. For a few moments the unexpected stillness of the cat alarmed the boys as much as its struggles did before. Every moment they expected it to break out with redoubled fury, and for their own protection they burrowed their heads deeper in the pile of torn canvas, leaves, and twigs.

Weston finally raised his head and peered carefully about. It was very dark, but he could see the dim outlines of the dead creature stretched on the ground. His knowledge of the ways of wild animals made him slow and cautious to make any advances until assured beyond doubt that the cat was dead.

Otto raised himself from the ground and stammered:

"Has he gone, cousin?"

"Gone?"—contemptuously. "No, there he is at your feet."

Otto jumped back a step, and then stood and stared at the lifeless body before him.

"Is he dead?" he gasped. Recovering his self-possession somewhat, he continued; "I thought that charge would fix him. I planted it straight between his eyes. If it hadn't been for that, he might have chewed you up before this, Weston. Indeed, I think you owe your life to me."

"I owe you a good fright, and a mighty bad scratch on my neck," growled Weston. "Why didn't you let the cat alone?"

"Why didn't he let us alone? I didn't ask him to come prowling around here in the middle of the night."

"But he didn't touch us," responded Weston, rubbing his neck. "If you hadn't shot at him, he would have left us. Haven't I told you that a dozen times?"

"Yes, but when a wild creature stands within two feet of you, glaring at you as if anxious to devour you at one mouthful, it's hardly the right time to talk like that," replied Otto with offended dignity. "Maybe you'll tell that he didn't attack us after all."

"Not until you wounded him," was the answer. "I've slept in these woods for weeks at a time, and was never yet touched by a wild-cat, panther or bear. If you let them alone, they'll let you alone. Wound them, and they'll fight like—like—well, like this chap. Did he hurt you any?"

"No, not much," grumbled Otto, disappointed that his cousin did not appreciate his heroic shot.

"Well, then, we'll chuck the carcass away, and see what we've got left of the tent and mosquito netting."

There was little more sleep that night for either boy. When the tent was examined, it was found to be torn almost to tatters, while the netting was little more than cobwebs. Weston growled and grumbled at this, and Otto complacently held his tongue. Towards morning both of them dropped off into a short slumber, with their bodies propped up against tree trunks; but at the best it was a poor sequel to their night's adventure, and they awoke at the break of dawn cross and unrefreshed.

CHAPTER IX.

THEY started up the Caloosahatchie the next morning rather late, having spent hours in repairing their tent, and collecting such things as the wild-cat had scattered around in all directions in his frantic death struggles. Weston was anxious to make good headway so that they would reach Okeechobee before the end of the week. There, at last, he expected to find some of the Seminoles who would give him the directions needed to find their chief. "The Green Corn Dance" of the Indians was not a secret affair, and there was no particular reason why they should be kept in ignorance of its whereabouts. Many white hunters had been present at the celebration in the past. It was a sort of dance to celebrate the successful growing of the green corn, and one intended to propitiate the god of all green things. That and the "Hunting Dance" in September were the two principal feasts and celebrations of the Seminoles.

"When do they hold the dance?" asked Otto when fairly on their journey again, each paddling his canoe close to the shore to avoid the strong current of midstream.

"This month, during the little moon," replied Weston. "That should be within a few days or a week or two at the latest."

"And you think we can reach there in time?"

"If it is at Okeechobee we can, but not if it is held at Miami or Cow Creek."

"If we are late then our mission will be in vain?" queried Otto.

"Not if we can find Billy Bowlegs, and I'm going to hunt for him all through the 'Glades. If he isn't at Okeechobee, we'll go to Big Cypress. If not there then on we'll go to New River, and then across the swamp to Cow Creek and to Miami. We'll find him some way."

Otto admired the spirit of determination breathed in these words, but as he looked ahead at the dismal stretches of swamp and river he was not so sure they would accomplish their purpose. He had heard a good deal about the vast areas of cypress and saw-grass swamps, and of the great shoreless, inland sea of Okeechobee. Hunters and explorers had been lost on this dismal waste of water for weeks before they found an outlet. Doubtless the Indians knew the region thoroughly, and they could play hide-and-seek with the two boys for months.

It seemed like a hopeless mission, and the further they paddled up the river the more desperate it appeared. The scenery grew wilder and more tropical in appearance. The vegetation was so dense that the shores of the river were completely hidden from view. Dense clumps of trailing vines hung in festoons from the trees, and brilliant air-plants unfurled their gorgeous flowers among the branches. Beautiful effects in decoration were visible on every side. Cypress and oak, pine and wild orange trees were festooned with great masses of Spanish moss. Gaunt dead trunks that had been smothered by this parasitic growth stood like sentinels in the swamp. Towering above the lower shrubbery were immense cabbage-palmettoes, spreading their umbrella-shaped heads of green among the branches of the cypress trees.

The river itself was, in places, half choked with aquatic plants. Bright lilies took possession of the calm nooks of the stream, while tall reed and saw-grass encroached upon the channel at every favorable bend and turn. Floating aquatic plants that had been uprooted by the current floated down on the bosom of the stream, still growing and flowering as though their roots were attached to the muddy bottom. Only in mid-stream the current moved with sufficient force to make paddling difficult, and by hugging the shores the boys did not find the work difficult.

The two explorers were quietly paddling away, intent upon their work, and debating in their minds whether it was not nearly time to eat again, when, in rounding a sharp bend in the river, they saw a most unexpected sight.

"What's that?" exclaimed Otto, resting on his paddle. "A house floating on the water?"

Weston had seen the strange apparition, and remained quiet for some time studying the object ahead. To all appearances it looked like a rude log house resting on the placid bosom of the river about a dozen feet from the left bank. The top of the house was half concealed by overhanging trees. A line anchored the house to a tree on the shore.

"A houseboat!" ejaculated Otto finally. "Somebody's living up here, and we'll get a good night's rest under a roof."

Weston shook his head. "It's the queerest looking houseboat I ever saw," he murmured.

"It's a homemade affair, that's why," replied Otto. "Anyhow I'm going to introduce myself."

They paddled rapidly in the direction of the queer house, which, upon closer inspection, they found to be resting on a flat-decked boat almost as crudely built as the house itself. There were several windows in the houseboat, but stout iron gratings were placed at them instead of window panes. There was no sign of flowers or plants on the narrow deck, nor other indication that it was inhabited.

"Seems deserted," Otto remarked, as the two canoes rapidly approached. "There isn't even a flag floating to show what nation the ark belongs to."

"There's something stirring aboard anyway," replied Weston. "Listen to the noise!"

For an instant they rested on their paddles and leaned forward to hear better. There was a peculiar humming noise from the queer craft that puzzled the boys more than its strange appearance on the river.

Otto looked nervously at the houseboat, and instead of bringing his canoe up near its side he slowly paddled around it.

"I want to know what I'm getting into before I land," he explained.

"It must be all right," Weston answered a little dubiously. "It has been inhabited lately, for there are some old clothes hanging on that rail. I'm going to hail it anyway."

Raising his voice in a prolonged shout he called: "Hell-o-o aboard!"

Three times he repeated his shout, but there was no response except the strange humming noise that appeared to come from the boat. Weston hesitated only a moment longer, and then brought his craft up alongside of the houseboat.

"I'm going aboard," he said. "They're either asleep or away. In either case there's no harm in landing."

"But if—" protested Otto. Then, seeing that Weston had already jumped aboard before he could finish his sentence, he added:

"Well, cousin, I've got to back you up. You may need me up there."

He stepped from his own canoe to the deck of the houseboat, which was nearly two feet above him. Taking a turn around the rail with the painter of his canoe, he stepped cautiously behind Weston.

Once more calling loudly to awaken anyone who might be asleep on the quiet craft, the two boys made their way toward one of the open, grated windows. Weston was in the lead.

"I'm going to take a peek inside," he said.

The grated window was on a level with his head, and by standing on his toes he thought he could see inside. When within a few inches of the window, he placed a hand on the lower sill to raise himself a trifle. This simple act had an effect that neither explorers could possibly anticipate. There was a deep roar from inside of the houseboat, and a wild animal sprang suddenly at the window, planting one foot on the sill, and grasping the iron grating with the other. With a series of angry yells, it then proceeded to shake and tear at the grating until the pieces rattled in their sockets.

Weston sprang back in astonished surprise, nearly stumbling over Otto in his haste. The animal had actually grazed his hand with a paw, and the marks of blood were on it. The fiery eyes and large whiskered face pressed against the grating belonged to a huge panther, such as Weston in all his experience in the Everglades had never before seen. The animal was so large and powerful for his species that the boy doubted if it could be one.

But their surprise was not limited to the sudden appearance of the huge panther. From different quarters of the houseboat there came deep roars and shrill screeches of many other animals and birds—wild-cats, bears, paroquets, mocking-birds, and wild turkeys. The confusing shrieks and cries were terrifying to listen to, for their echoes were magnified by the narrow rooms and halls of the boat. The strange murmuring noises that had attracted their attention at first were now explained. The houseboat was evidently the refuge of innumerable forest creatures. They had formed a sort of happy family there, each species taking possession of separate rooms, and agreeing not to quarrel or fight among themselves.

Weston suddenly turned and said, "Back to your canoe! The boat is full of wild animals!"

Otto made a hasty retreat. When once more in their canoes, with their trusty guns in their hands, and a few feet of water separating them from the queer Noah's Ark, they felt safer and more composed.

"Well, of all things," gasped Otto, "that beats the band!"

Weston returned the smile.

"I never heard of such a thing before," he replied. "Why, there are all sorts of creatures aboard. Look at that window! If that isn't a black bear's face, I miss my guess."

"And there's a wild-cat at the next window. Look at him scratch and pull at the bars."

"But why don't they come after us?" queried Weston, more to himself than to his cousin.

"Don't like the sunlight," answered Otto. "They're night prowlers, and that's where they spend their days. I'd like to get a shot at one of them."

"No, no; remember your wild-cat last night. You brought trouble enough upon the camp without trying another aimless shot. We must investigate further. It doesn't look like a deserted houseboat."

"No, for there are signs on the deck that somebody has been on it recently. See the clothes hanging on the rail."

"Then it must be that the animals have surprised the owner and driven him away."

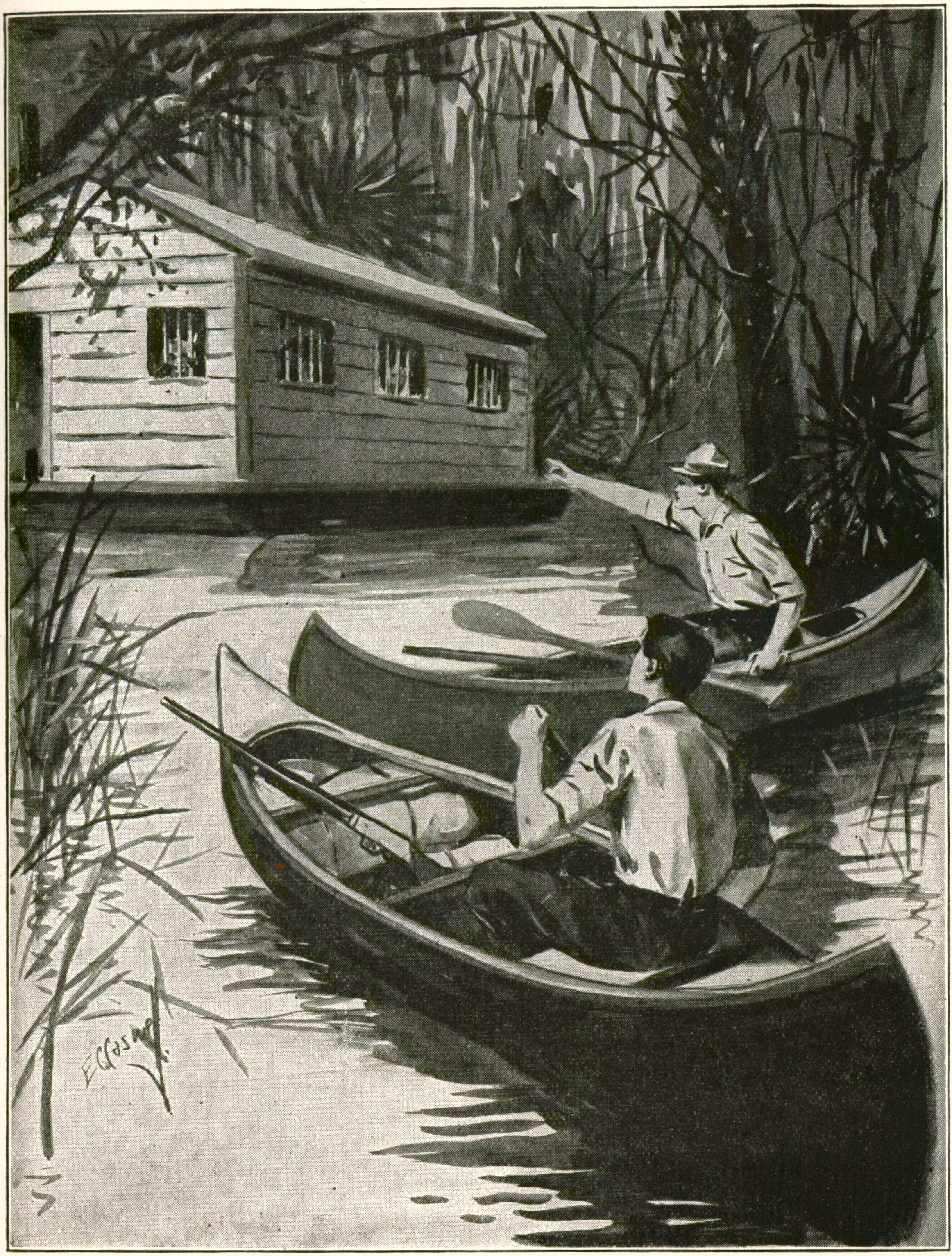
"Or eaten him up," added Otto.

"It might be, but it's very peculiar. I never knew so many wild animals to live together so peacefully. Why, there are paroquets aboard, and—and wasn't that an alligator?"

The unmistakable croaking of a big bull alligator appeared to rise from the depths of the ark, followed by the chattering of innumerable birds.

"This is beyond me," Weston muttered again. "I don't understand it!"

"Neither do I," replied Otto, "and I don't like it a bit. It's sort of uncanny—like a haunted house."



"LOOK AT HIM SCRATCH AND PULL AT THE BARS."

CHAPTER X.

THE mystery of the houseboat continued to keep the boys from effecting a landing, although Weston was strongly inclined to make another attempt to solve the problem by crawling toward the open door of the cabin nearest the shore. This door they could see was flung wide open, and they could not understand why the animals and birds did not come forth.

Finally, Weston said, "I'm going to frighten them out if possible. I'll shoot in the air and see what effect that will have."

Picking up his gun from the bottom of the canoe, he waved it over his head and shouted to attract the attention of the wild animals peering out of the grated windows. Then at an opportune moment he pulled the trigger, and sent the charge flying into the air. The explosion brought sudden commotion again. It seemed as if a score or more of wild animals and birds added their hoarse cries and shrill chattering to the noise. It was difficult to distinguish any particular note above the rest, so great was the hubbub.

But the boys watched in vain for some of the creatures to appear in the doorway of the boat. Everything was quiet there, and not an animal showed himself in sight. Gradually the noise subsided, and the effect of the shot was apparently fruitless.

Weston dropped down in his canoe and wiped the perspiration from his brow. He was puzzled and confused. Glancing up at his cousin once, he laughed, and said, "This must all be a dream, Otto. Whoever heard of such a thing as a houseboat full of wild animals down here in the Everglades?"

"It's no dream," Otto responded. "I'm wide awake, but I think the swamp must be haunted, and this is a bad omen."

"If something doesn't happen pretty soon, I'm going aboard the old ark and investigate. I'll even go inside."

"And get killed. What shall I do then down in this swamp?"

Otto's protest indicated apprehension, but Weston turned with mock gravity and replied:

"You'd better come aboard, too. We can die together in the attempt to avenge the death of the poor owner of this houseboat."

"You really think the animals did kill the owner and take possession of his home?" Otto asked seriously.

"How else can we explain it? It may be that the owner returned from a trip in the swamp and found the animals in possession, and he could not drive them out."

"In that case he should be somewhere around."

They glanced over at the dense growth of bushes and vines obscuring the bank of the river. As they did so they saw a well-worn path leading to the water's edge, and at the end a rude sort of dock or pier. There was a coil of rope on this dock, and several useful articles such as a carpenter might own. The two boys paddled up to this dock and landed. On every hand were abundant signs that the place had very recently been inhabited by men. Weston knelt down and examined some of the tracks in the soil.

"Somebody has been here within the past few hours," he announced. "These tracks were made since last night."

"The mystery increases," whispered Otto.

Then hearing a distant noise in the swamp, he added: "Here comes somebody now to explain it all to us."

Weston listened to the noise in the woods. It was the unmistakable footsteps of a man or beast forcing a way through the thick underbrush. For a moment Weston stood irresolute; then in a low voice he said:

"I think we'll be wise to hide, or to shove off from the shore. Who knows but our old enemy of yesterday is approaching us? We left him on this side of the river."

They pushed their canoes from the dock and paddled softly until overhanging bushes and vines afforded them a good hiding place. They were barely out of sight of the houseboat and dock when a crash in the bushes just back of them made them jump. They turned their eyes toward the shore, and saw an old grizzled swamp hunter standing within a few yards of them. The two boys gave a grunt of surprise, but the old hunter remained passively quiet.

Weston was so well versed in the lore of the swamp, and of the characteristics of the hunters who lived in it, that he gave a sigh of relief after the first minute of surprise and uncertainty. The eyes and face of the man were unmistakably friendly and honest. There was nothing to fear. He was one of the numerous hunters who had become so attached to the pathless wilds of the Everglades that nothing could induce them to leave. They were half Indian in their fondness for the great swamp, and the two often lived on the most friendly of terms in their nomadic life.

Weston was on the point of speaking first, offering friendly advances, when the old hunter, removing his cap to scratch his hot head, said:

"Waal, boys, I see ye're here, an' ye look a little mite startled. Ain't seen a ghost, have ye?"

"No," they replied at once, laughing at the hunter's remark.

"But we've seen something nearly as bad," Weston continued. "We found a Noah's Ark full of wild animals and birds floating on the river."

"'Taint floatin' away from the shore, is it?" queried the man a little anxiously.

"Oh, no, it's tied all right, but it's haunted with the ghosts of panthers, bears, wild-cats, and—"

"Shure now! Ye don't mean it. The animals ain't gone an' died since this mornin', and left only their sperits behind. That is bad!"

Weston paddled toward the shore. The twinkle in the hunter's eyes amused him; he knew that the man was enjoying a situation that he knew more about than they did.

"Is it your houseboat?" asked the boy, stepping ashore.

"What! This Noah's Ark ye're tellin' me about with the sperits of wild animals aboard?"

Otto pulled his canoe up the soft, green bank, and stood beside his cousin. Instinctively he knew that the hunter was a man to be trusted, and the mystery of the houseboat had taken such a deep hold of his imagination that he was anxious to clear it up.

"Do you live on the boat?" he asked. "And do you own the animals?"

It flashed across his mind that this grim old hunter might have tamed a small menagerie of animals.

"Tame 'em?" queried the hunter. "Tame a wild-cat an' panther! Did you ever hear of anybody doin' such a thing? They can't be tamed, boy, not down in these parts. They might do such things in circuses, but not down here."

"But they belong to you?" persisted Otto.

"What should I be doin' with 'em?"

Weston took a hand in the conversation, for he saw that the old man was avoiding the direct issue, and light was slowly dawning upon his mind.

"What in the world are you doing with them?" he asked, taking it for granted that the hunter owned them.

"Well, now, that's a question that takes a deal of time to answer," replied the man. "But come aboard, and we'll talk it over. I see ye've found me out, an' there ain't no use tryin' to deceive you."

They walked along the edge of the bank down a well-beaten path that led directly to the nearest point of land facing the houseboat. When they reached this the hunter stepped to one side and pulled out of the bushes a small boat which had been carefully concealed therein.

"This will hold all of us," he said, motioning them to get in.

When they had rowed in silence to the houseboat, and climbed aboard, the boys for the first time showed an inclination to hang back. Otto expressed their feelings: "Do you think the animals will take kindly to us? They don't know us as well as they do you, and they might—"

"They'd chew me up quick as they would ye," replied the man with a chuckle. "They'd do it little sooner, too, I reckon, for they have a grudge again' me, an'—"

"Then isn't it dangerous to go any further? I—I—don't think I want to see them."

Otto held back, but the man's reply reassured him.

"They can't touch ye," he answered. "They're shut up tight in their little prisons. They make a lot of noise, but they can't bite an' scratch."

"You have them imprisoned?" exclaimed the boys together.

"You didn't think I had 'em loose, did ye? Land, boys, they'd scratch the eyes out of me, an' then chew each other up! They're my pets, but they ain't very gentle ones. I have to keep 'em in good, strong rooms. There's that panther—the biggest feller I've seen in the 'Glades; Big Tim, I call him—he's 'bout as rough a customer as ye'd find anywhere. It took me nigh a week to get him in that room, an' he's dyin' to get even with me. Then there's little Tommy, the wild-cat, he's most nigh crazy spittin' an' hissin' at me. He's said some mighty naughty things to me in his cat language. Black Jakey's there, too, a pretty little bear that's gettin' real tame. If he keeps on I'll let him run around on deck, an' mebbe keep him for company. He ain't a bit savage, an' he'll take honey an' such things out of my hand any day."

While thus describing some of the amiable qualities of his queer companions, the hunter led the way inside of the houseboat. The open door led directly into the living quarters. This was a square room equipped with a table and two wooden stools, an old camp stove, a few iron and tin cups, sauce pans, and various other paraphernalia for camping. A glance around this room showed that it was pleasant and commodious, with light and air admitted on two sides.

Another door opened into a small room which had the unmistakable signs of a bedroom. The old hunter's couch had not been made up for the day, and the tumbled blankets showed that he appreciated plenty of warm clothing for such a climate.

"Here's where I live," the man said, sweeping a hand around his head. "There's where I sleep, and there's where I keep my pets."

He opened a door, and instantly there was a wild commotion. The two boys stepped back as the babel of sounds reached their ears. But there was no reason to shrink from entering. The corridor beyond was narrow, and ranged alongside of it were small compartments, shut off one from another by wooden partitions and iron gratings. Inside of these cages were all sorts of wild animals and birds. The latter were for the most part kept at the opposite end of the boat, but a few were imprisoned close to the large carnivorous animals.

"What a sight!" exclaimed Weston.

"A pretty good collection of 'em," replied the hunter quietly.

"But what do you do with them?"

"Sell 'em," laconically answered the man.

The boys stared at him, showing their ignorance of the man's meaning by the expression of their eyes.

"Yes, sell 'em," added the hunter. "There's Big Tim, he's worth a lot—more'n any three of 'em. He's a beauty, an' he'll be worth considerable if he don't worry himself to death. Little Tommy is also worth a good deal, and then there's—

oh, I didn't show ye the subterranean regions! Waal, just get a look at some of the 'gators."

Sliding open a trap-door almost under their feet, the man exposed to view a dozen big alligators reposing in various positions in the lower part of the houseboat. They were the largest that Weston had seen in the swamp, and they looked up wickedly at the boys out of their small twinkling eyes.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Otto. "What do you do with them? They're big fellows. I never saw their equals."

"No, they're beauties! It took me a long time to get 'em out of the water. They didn't particularly like to come aboard."

"You didn't get them aboard alone?" replied Weston incredulously. "Why, half a dozen men couldn't capture one of those 'gators alive."

"So ye'd think, but a little rope an' tackle will do wonders. I'll show ye the riggin' later. Want to see the snakes?"

The trap-door was closed with a click, and the man turned to another door. This opened with a creak, revealing cages with covering of wire netting. Inside were coiled a score of reptiles. Some were large diamond-back rattlers, and others small black-snakes, thick-set moccasins, and beautifully-colored coach-snakes. They were separated from each other by glass partitions or wooden slides.

The boys gasped in wonder. Otto shuddered as he remembered his recent experience with a rattlesnake. The old hunter smiled his appreciation of their astonishment, and then said, closing the door:

"Come now an' have something to eat. We'll talk 'bout 'em better with a full stomach."

* * *

CHAPTER XI.

THE old hunter prepared a dinner for the boys in the small kitchen of the houseboat that they remembered many days afterward. Weston's cooking was crude and insipid compared to the culinary art of their new swamp acquaintance. There was broiled venison steak, crisp and delicious; fried sweet potatoes, browned in the fat of fresh beef; brown bread that had the flavor of the homemade article; sweet oranges and bananas from some Indian grove; guava-jelly, and a few wild kumquats gathered from the swamp uplands.

After their week of camping in the swamp it was a treat to eat at the wooden table with such a varied repast spread before them. The old hunter's eyes twinkled with gratification at their remarks of appreciation, for he was undoubtedly calling upon his special storehouse of goods to treat his visitors.

"Hereafter when I go camping in the Everglades," remarked Otto at the close of the meal, "I'm going to travel in a houseboat. This is something like living."

"I'm afraid you've spoiled him," Weston added. "He won't want to go on with me and take chances in finding enough to eat in the swamp."

"He can stay here until yo' come back," replied the swamp hunter. "I've got plenty for him to do. There's a cargo of snakes I want to pick up before I drift down to Fort Myers."

Otto shuddered.

"Speaking of snakes," he said, "makes me nervous. I don't think I could accept your offer. I don't know that I could sleep aboard this houseboat with those snakes in the cages. Ugh! I'd be dreaming of them all night."

"Snakes ain't so bad if ye know how to handle 'em," drawled the hunter, lighting his pipe, and stretching his legs contentedly. "When I first came down here, I was mighty afeard of 'em. But I got over it. I used to shoot 'em—blow 'em up with a shot gun every time I met 'em, an' then run away so they couldn't follow me. But now I never kill one. It's better to catch an' sell 'em than to kill 'em."

"Where do you sell them?" asked Otto, suddenly remembering that they were in ignorance of the man's real occupation.

"Up North," was the answer. "Most of 'em goes to New York, an' then to all the circuses an' menageries of the country. Ye see they can't get enough wild animals nowadays, an' it pays a man to live down here an' catch 'em for the trade. I load up this houseboat twice a year, an' ship them down to Fort Myers. They want all kinds of wild animals—live ones, not dead ones—an' the prices are goin' up every year."

"Then you don't hunt the birds and animals to kill them?" Weston said, a little incredulously. "You're not a swamp plume-hunter?"

The old man's gray eyes flashed a little, and for a moment he did not answer. Then removing his pipe, he said:

"Tim Murphy hasn't killed a bird or animal, 'cept what he had to for something to eat, in twenty years, an' he ain't goin' to in the next twenty years, providin' the Lord lets him live that long."

"I'm glad to hear it!" exclaimed Weston, rising and grasping the hunter's hand in one of his own. "I took you for a plume-hunter at first, but I'm sure you don't look it. I'm opposed to the slaughter of the birds and animals down here, and I'm glad to find another who thinks as I do."

"My boy, ye're right! Jest stick to them principles. It's the plume- and skin-hunters that's spoilin' Florida. There ain't no such numbers of birds in the swamps today as they was when I came down here. They're killin' 'em off too fast. It's slaughter—murder! And what for? Jest because they want to trim hats with 'em. I ain't sayin' nothin' agin wimmin folks, but if a daughter or wife of mine wore any of these bird plumes on their hats I'd tell 'em they was as guilty of murder as the hunters. I'd shame 'em into feelin' sorry for the poor things. If they had any conscience at all they'd see the error of their ways before I got through with 'em, they would!"

The two boys laughed at the hunter's serious face and the words which expressed his emphatic meaning. The man's convictions on this particular point had been settled long ago, and the injustice that was being done to the plumage birds was a sore point with him.

"Last winter they shipped North pretty nigh half a million bird plumes from the swamp," he continued, "an' the year before that nearly half as many more. Think of that! Over a million birds gone in two seasons jest to wear on wimmin's hats! 'Tain't right! No, sir, 'tain't right! No, sir, 'tain't right!"

The ominous shake of the head emphasized this conclusion. For a few moments there was silence on the deck, and then Tim Murphy said abruptly:

"But I won't worry over that now. We can't help it. If they don't pass laws to protect the birds, an' then enforce 'em, ye can't expect to stop the slaughter in the swamp."

"Yes, you can," replied Weston. "You can pass laws prohibiting the sale of bird plumages, and then make it a crime for anyone to wear them in their hats. That would stop the traffic quicker than laying all the blame to the hunters."

"Ain't sure but ye're right, my boy," replied the hunter slowly. "That's kinder puttin' it up to both ends, an' they're both to blame."

"They're working for that end now," continued Weston. "It won't be many years before bird feathers on a woman's hat will be a badge of dishonor instead of a sign of fashion."

Old Tim looked a little incredulous at this, but he shook his head approvingly.

"I hope ye're right. I do hope so."

While they were talking, the birds and animals confined in the cages of the houseboat grew restless and noisy, and the old hunter finally rose, and said:

"It's 'bout eatin' time for my family,

an' I must get to work. If ye want to see some pretty good appetites just come along with me. Confinement don't seem to take away their hunger, an' it's gettin' harder every day to feed 'em enough."

"I should think it would take most of your time to get food for them," replied Otto, following the man to the stern of the houseboat where provisions were kept for the birds and animals.

"It did the first year I was down here. I didn't understand it then, but I come prepared now. I bring along a good many things, an' then the swamp is full of food. There's wild rice, wild celery, and berries and fruits aplenty in the swamp for the birds, an' fish an' meat to be caught for the 'gators an' bears an' panthers. They ain't very easily satisfied, but I'm teachin' 'em to like bread an' other things that's good for their temper. They don't get meat but once a day, an' that ain't a very big allowance. They kinder rebel at first, an' stick their noses up at it, but when they're good an' hungry they're glad to get anything to eat."

The old man's larder was abundantly stocked with a queer assortment of provisions, some of which he had brought with him from Fort Myers, and others which he had gathered fresh in the swamp. Generous proportions of the food were doled out to the imprisoned creatures. They snapped and snarled at the food, and swallowed it down greedily, after which their tempers appeared to undergo a change. Most of them curled up in corners and quietly dozed in peaceful slumber.

"Beats all how a little food will make a critter happy," chuckled the hunter. "Give 'em enough to eat, an' they ain't got no quarrel with the world. Jest like some people. They're always complainin' on an empty stomach, an' happy and contented on a full one. Don't seem to have no more ambition in life than to get jest enough to eat."

The reptiles and alligators were more easily tamed in this way than the birds and carnivorous animals. They swallowed their food with greedy satisfaction, and then closed their eyes unmindful of the presence of their enemies.

While they stood looking at the great saurians eating, Weston asked, "How in the world did you ever get such big fellows aboard alone?"

"Jest got a rope around their bodies, an' then hitched the other end to the tackle on the front of the boat. When I wound in they jest couldn't help crawlin' aboard. They kicked some, an' hung back, but there wasn't nothin' else for 'em to do than to come along. I'll show you how it's done to-morrow. There's another big one huntin' round the boat every mornin' for his breakfast. I've been sort of gettin' acquainted with him for a week, feedin' him when the others get their breakfast. He's got a real tame an' friendly. To-morrow I'll get a line over him when he comes for his breakfast, an' ye'll see how easy it is to capture one alive."

"So you lure them to their fate with food?" laughed the boys. "Do you make friends with all the animals first?"

"Most of 'em get a few free meals before I attempt to get 'em. It sorter makes it easier, an' makes 'em feel better. They ain't quite so afraid of ye after they've eaten' yer grub for a week or two."

"I believe you intend to feed us up and then capture us for your menagerie," added Weston. "I think I'll be careful how I eat your food hereafter."

"There may be something in that. This swamp is full of ungrateful varmints."

"I should think so," answered Otto abruptly. "We found one trying to steal our boat, and we only saved it in the nick of time."

The two boys related their rough experience with the man who had so nearly gotten away with one of their canoes. Tim Murphy, the gray-headed animal trapper listening intently to the rehearsal.

"Wall, now!" he ejaculated when the tale was finished. "Who would have thought there was such a cuss in this swamp? Talk about animals, why they ain't in it with such fellows! But what do ye s'pose he wanted with yer boat, an' what sort of a chap was he?"

"He was no hunter," Weston explained. "I've lived down here too long not to know them. He was a stranger to these swamps, and better educated than the average plume-hunter and trapper."

"Then his presence down here don't mean no good for us or anybody else. He ain't the kind to have any dealin's with. We'd better be on the lookout for him."

"He might appear here any time," Weston observed, looking down the river. "He was headed this way, and you may have a glimpse of him yet."

"Better keep away from here," the old hunter replied with a smile. "If he goes cuttin' up any of his monkey-shines around this ark he'll get into a cage that I reserves for such wild critters."

CHAPTER XII.

THE boys spent the night with the old hunter, sleeping on clean, sweet blankets in a small room by themselves. Otto appreciated this privilege better than his cousin, for remembrance of his experience with the wild-cat the previous night made him a trifle nervous. In the morning he was awakened by the wild beasts and birds clamoring for their breakfast. He turned over and stretched, conscious that he had passed a most refreshing night. Weston was already up and on deck, helping the hunter feed the hungry creatures in their cages.

Otto appeared on deck a few minutes later. The day was opening gloriously, with the sun shining through the tall trees, and lighting up the river and swamp with its golden rays. The chorus of songs had long since made the woods echo, and many of the birds were diving in the pools and along the shallow river edge for their breakfast.

"I should enjoy staying here for a week," Otto said, approaching his cousin.

"Well, I'm going to give you a day and night of it," Weston responded. "Mr. Murphy tells me that the Seminoles don't have their Green Corn Dance for a week yet, and that it is held this year at Okeechobee. It won't take us more than a couple of days to paddle up to their village. Billy Bowlegs is to be there, and Mr. Murphy has told me a lot about him. I think our mission will prove a success."

"Then I'm going to enjoy life here the best I can," answered Otto, with a shrug of his shoulders. "It seems like living again."

"It seems to me," retorted Weston with a smile, "that you make a pretty poor hunter and camper. Suppose you had to live in these swamps a whole season."

"I'd have a houseboat as Mr. Murphy does," was the prompt answer.

"And catch snakes and alligators and wild-cats for a living?"

"No-o-o. Not exactly that. I'd just live here, and—"

"Die of loneliness and idleness," laughed Weston. Then in a changed voice, he added: "But come and eat your breakfast. We're going out with our friend this morning hunting. He's going to see if he can find some more snakes or big panthers. He'd like to capture another diamond-back rattler, and he'll show us how to do the trick."

"If he doesn't ask me to get too close, I'll go along," rather doubtfully assented Otto. "Seems to be I don't want to get nearer than a rod to a snake again for ten years."

"It will be safe enough with such a professional snake-catcher with us," replied Weston.

Within an hour they were ready to leave

the houseboat. To Otto's query as to whether it was safe to leave the houseboat unprotected the old hunter responded:

"Don't think anybody will come aboard to do much investigatin' with all of these animals here. They jest frighten away everythin' that comes near the boat. I leave the doors open so they can see for themselves. 'Tain't likely they'll do more'n row aroun' the boat. Leastwise, nobody has dared to come aboard fur the past five years, an' I ain't never locked things up yet."

"Even our old enemy who tried to steal our boat might get a scare that would make him fight shy of the place," replied Otto.

"Yaas, I think he would," drawled Murphy.

The old hunter knew every trail in the swamp, and he took up the line of march without difficulty.

"I want to go round to a colony of snowy herons that I've been watchin' for more'n a fortnight," he explained. "They've built their nests there, an' sometimes the big rattlers come roun' to eat a few young birds. I've caught three of 'em at their meals, an' bagged 'em. The herons sort of know that I don't mean any mischief. They'll jest flop aroun' an' tell me that all's well, or they'll set up a screamin' to let me know that the snakes an' 'gators are roun' in the bushes. Wonderful how much some birds know!"

"I'd like to see a colony of herons," Otto said eagerly. "They're such beautiful birds that it must be a rare sight to find them nesting in numbers."

"Never saw a colony before? Waal, then, you'll see a sight worth comin' down here to see. Yaas, they're beautiful birds, an' as innocent as they're beautiful."

They tramped along slowly and cautiously for nearly half an hour, picking their way through the dense undergrowth with considerable difficulty. Finally, when they reached a low part of the swamp nearly a mile back from the river, the ground sloped up a little, and seemed to form a sort of isolated island in the woods. All around the mossy ground was soft and watery, but once upon the island the ground was firm and dry. Across this space the hunters could see a shallow pond or lagoon, which stretched out into a small stream that disappeared into the swamp on the opposite side.

A few herons were flying about overhead or croaking in the bushes near by. Murphy stopped suddenly, and bent his head to listen. When he shook it silently, the boys were puzzled at the expression on his face.

"Don't understand them cries," he said. "They don't say that all's well, an' they ain't tellin' me that the snakes have been here."

For just another minute the gray-headed man listened, and then added, "I don't understand it. But we'll go ahead an' find out."

They emerged from the low, swampy thicket, and stepped upon the drier ground which the herons had selected for their nesting place. As they reached the higher level, they could see beautiful herons walking in the shallow water. But for the most part the colony seemed quiet and depressed. This was so different from what the boys had been led to expect that they were disappointed.

Suddenly the eyes of Tim Murphy glowed with anger. He dropped his gun on the ground, and muttered: "They've been here! They've destroyed the whole colony!"

"Who have been here?" asked Otto and Weston in a breath.

"The plume-hunters! Look here, an' there!"

He pointed dramatically to white objects strewn over the shores of the lagoon, and then to the rookery itself. One glance now sufficed to show the wreck and desolation around. The plume-hunters had visited the herony and slaughtered its inhabitants by the scores. The white objects on the edge of the lagoon were herons. Some were not quite dead yet, and they struggled feebly, the white plumage stained with their own blood.

The herons had been attacked in their own home, some on their nests, and others as they had flown toward the protecting circle of trees. To make the sight more horrible and grewsome, the beautiful plumage or aigrettes had been cut and torn from the bodies, leaving the birds to die a lingering death. Some of the dying herons were flapping feebly in the lagoon, dyeing the water with the crimson streams from their wounds. It was a sight to make the hardest-hearted sick with pity.

"What a crime!" exclaimed Otto. "They must be men without feeling or pity to do such a thing."

"Yaas, an' jest to provide your ladies with aigrettes for their heads," snapped Murphy, with an omnious click of his teeth.

Dumb with astonishment and anger, they walked across the favored piece of land which the herons had selected for their home. In the rookery they found the rude platforms of sticks broken down, and the pale blue eggs smashed or rolled out into the dirt. In other nests they found tiny young herons which had died of starvation or neglect, and a few which still feebly called for their mothers' protection and help. The more advanced nestlings had lingered longer, and they were clamoring for food.

An occasional solitary parent flew out of the swamp in response to the cries of the nestlings to carry food to them; but their return to the wrecked city was so different from former times that they merely flew wildly overhead with only a few croaks. Tears stood in the eyes of the old hunter, as he said:

"They won't trust me any more. They believe I'm responsible for their trouble. What was the damage that a few snakes or 'gators could do compared to this? No wonder they fear us, an' flee in terror."

"Can't we do something for them?" stammered Otto, with face nearly as white as the snowy plumage of the dead birds.

"Nothing except to put the wounded birds out of their misery," was the angry reply of Murphy. "We can only murder where we should like to save."

"I don't think I can do it," Otto replied with a glance at the suffering birds.

"It sometimes takes more courage to put a creature out of torment than it does to save him," was the quiet answer of the hunter. "You must help us."

There was nothing else to do. The birds would welcome relief from the awful pain they were suffering. The hot sun had already dried the blood on many of the white backs, and its scorching rays were adding misery to the suffering of the wounded.

"Quick! Do it quickly, an' surely!" commanded the old hunter. "Make each blow effective."

And so with sticks in their hands, the three merciful destroyers walked from one side of the colony to the other, swinging their stout sticks to destroy the lives of the few remaining herons. Here and there some of the older nestlings appeared almost strong enough to care for themselves. These had been overlooked by the plume-hunters as their slender, lace-like plumes had not reached sufficient development to be of commercial value. No woman would pay a good price for the half-developed aigrettes of the nestlings.

These older nestlings were captured and fed by the three visitors. Tim Murphy said: "I'll come every day an' feed 'em until they can take care of themselves."

Some of the weaker ones he even carried back to his houseboat, willing prisoners, for the long absence of food and their natural protectors had made the birds quiet and weak. Nothing could be done to save the eggs. These were already cold and lifeless. Even the few parents which had escaped the general slaughter realized that it was useless to return to their nests to hatch out the eggs. Their city was destroyed, and most of their companions and families had gone down in the general massacre. The few which mournfully croaked in the bushes, or flapped heavily overhead, kept at a respectful distance from the rookery.

"For a fortnight now I've been comin' here nearly every day," Murphy said, when their unpleasant work was finished, "an' these birds were happy an' trustful. I could pick some of 'em up in my hands, an' there was no outcry. Now hundreds of 'em have been killed, an' the whole colony is wiped out. It's a crime that—"

"Come away, it makes me sick," protested Otto. "I can't understand how anybody can be so cruel."

"Yes, we'll go back to the houseboat," replied Murphy. "I haven't the heart to hunt any more to-day."

"The hunters are cruel in their work," Weston said slowly, "but, after all, the the cause of this terrible massacre is the thoughtless fashion of wearing aigrettes. If that isn't stopped this slaughter in the swamp will never cease."

"True, my boy, but how are you goin' to stop it? Women will wear aigrettes and bird plumes if they're in the fashion. We might stop killin' the herons, but it would be some other bird then—the egrets, the ibises, nonpareils, or some other."

"I don't think so, if the matter could be presented in the right way to those who wear bird plumes."

"It may be; it may be," was the noncommittal reply of the old hunter.

They made a quiet and solemn procession as they walked through the swamp to the river, and when they finally reached the houseboat they boarded it without further remark. Somehow, the beauties and attractions of the swamp had lost their fascination for them, and they forgot even to notice the bright glimmer of the sun on the water. The hunter busied himself with simple duties inside of his floating home, and then late in the afternoon he said to the boys:

"You're goin' up to Okeechobee in the mornin' to hunt up the Seminoles? Waal, then, I think I'll move up river a bit with you. Somehow this place has lost its charms for me. I couldn't visit that herony agin' without feelin' pretty bad, an' I'll have to do it if I stay here. Yaas, I'll go a bit with you."

Otto's face brightened.

"Then we will have another day aboard of the houseboat?" he said.

"If you want to help me to pole her up stream ye can."

"We'll pole her, an' sail her, too," was the quick response.

"If there's any wind a-blowin' we can sail a bit, an' make better time. I've got a suit of old sails aboard."

"But if the wind is blowing downstream you can't use your sails," said Weston, with an inquiring and incredulous look on his face.

"No, I can only sail before the wind. I think, however, that we can make pretty good time polin' an' rowin'. If you two will paddle upstream with your canoes, an' give me a tow, I'll see that we go fast enough."

"Of course we'll give you a tow," replied Weston. "But what do you do when alone in getting upstream with the tide running strong and swift? You surely can't pole this clumsy craft alone!"

"I manage to get there," was the quiet rejoinder. "When I can't do it one way, I do it another. Two years ago the river was mighty swollen, an' the current was pretty strong. I had some difficulty in gettin' up then. I had to row ahead in the dingy, and fasten a rope to a big tree on the bank. Then I'd row back, an' begin to wind up the rope on that old windlass. It was pretty slow work, but I made a few miles a day. When the rope was wound up, I'd have to cast anchor, an' row upstream again. The rope was only five hundred feet long, an' it took some time to make the trip. But ye can always do things if ye go at them the right way, an' then stick at 'em to the last."

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CHAPTER XIII.

THE following day the houseboat was moved slowly upstream. A favorable breeze fortunately aided the three river navigators. The old hunter brought forth his homemade sails and rigged them upon poles fore and aft of the boat. When the craft was poled out into midstream, the gentle breeze caught the sails and steadily wafted her up the Caloosahatchie.

"No need of wastin' your time rowin' or polin'," the hunter said. "Wait until the wind dies out, an' then you can use your muscles."

For half a day the wind held strong and steady, and the old craft made considerable progress; but toward noon the breeze grew so gentle that it could not fill out the sails. Mr. Murphy, as captain and owner of the houseboat, then announced:

"We'll drop anchor now, an' have some dinner. Then if the wind keeps like this we'll pole her up a ways."

The wind did not freshen, but gradually died out so that scarcely a leaf stirred among the trees. The houseboat would have drifted downstream with the current had not the anchor securely held it to its muddy moorings.

After a good dinner, prepared in Mr. Murphy's best manner, the boys got in their canoes, and started to paddle upstream. They carried light ropes over their sterns to the bow of the houseboat, and while they towed the owner poled. The craft was kept close to the overhanging banks of the stream to avoid the strongest part of the current. It was easier poling here, but the shallowness of the water was of little real value on account of the depth of the mud.

"It seems to me," remarked Otto, glancing at the stream of mud stirred up by the long pole of Mr. Murphy, "that if we fell overboard here we'd drown in mud more than in water."

"You mean the mud would hold you fast while the water drowned you," replied Weston, paddling hard to make better headway.

For two hours they kept up this strenuous method of propulsion, the houseboat moving with a snail's pace from one bend in the river to another. The tropic nature of the scenery continued to change and vary, calling forth remarks of surprise and enthusiasm from Otto.

"It seems to me that you waste more breath in admiring the things on the shore than in paddling," good-naturedly chaffed Weston.

"Can't help it," was the reply. "I was born with eyes, and I must use them. See that bird! Isn't it a beauty! What is it, cousin?"

"Oh, that? Why, it's a paroquet, but it looks like a streak of crimson flying through the air. When he lights on a tree you'll forget the beauty of his plumage in your disgust over his ugly face and harsh voice. Hear him scream now!"

"The paroquets always seemed to me like mistakes," Otto reflected. "They're so beautiful of feathers, and so harsh of manners, and—"

"Hello!" interrupted the strong voice of Mr. Murphy. "Pull toward the shore now! I'm going to anchor here!"

The boys were not sorry of this, for they had paddled until their arms ached. The point selected for anchorage was behind a sharp bend in the shore, with a little sandy beach protecting the boat from any drift in the tide. The trees came down to the water's edge, but the forest jungle was quite open here, and they could see some distance in it.

"I'm going to stay here for a few days," Mr. Murphy explained, "to see if I can pick up more animals for my cargo. Then I'll drift downstream and discharge what I've already caught."

"Then, I suppose, we'll have to separate," mournfully replied Otto. "We must go upstream, and you down."

Otto looked so sad and depressed that Weston laughed outright. "If you're so sorry to leave the houseboat," he said, "I'll let you go back with Mr. Murphy, while I go alone to interview Billy Bowlegs."

Otto's face suddenly lost its depression. "Do you think I'd do that?" he asked quickly. "No, cousin, much as I like pleasure and comfort, I like duty more."

Tim Murphy nodded his head with approval. In the short space of time that the three had been together, he had learned to like the boys, and nearly everything they said coincided with his views.

"Stick to that," he said now in a serious voice, "an' you'll come out all right in the end. Duty an' work first, an' then pleasure. But—" and he hesitated a moment, looking at the boys as if he thought they might not understand such mature philosophy—"the pleasure is often in the work, and not as a reward for it."

"Then we got our pleasure in rowing up this stream, and not in the reward of being here?" queried Otto, in mock skepticism.

"I don't mean that there isn't a reward for work well done," replied the old hunter with some hesitancy. "But you see the pleasure of making your way up this stream against all difficulties was something not to be despised. It's struggling with troubles an' difficulties that makes life a pleasure, an' if you overcome them it's doubly sweet."

"I suppose you practice that philosophy when you're on the trail of a particularly obstinate animal," Weston replied with a smile.

"And we're supposed to observe it when we're working for a good dinner so we won't think of the dinner but of the fun in the work," Otto added in a whimsical way.

"I think," drawled out Mr. Murphy, "we'll leave the rest of the argument until after supper. We can discuss it by moonlight."

But he had no intention of discussing it again, and the moonlight talk easily drifted into story-telling, with Mr. Murphy as the chief narrator of incidents in his eventful career. They did not seek rest until long past midnight, and then they were reluctant to separate.

In the morning Weston and Otto pulled out into the stream and waved a final farewell to their companion. Tim Murphy stood on the stern of the houseboat until their two canoes disappeared in the distance. Then, smoking his pipe in nervous haste, he reflected:

"Mighty sorry to have 'em leave. They're the kind of boys I should like to own—strong, healthy, an' right-minded. They'll be of some good in the world. Wish there was more jest like 'em."

Otto and Weston on their part paddled away in silence for a good half-hour. Their thoughts, however, were far behind them, and they seemed to carry in their mind a vision of a white-haired, sturdy hunter, standing on the stern of his boat, looking wistfully at them.

"I hope we'll see him again," Otto said finally aloud.

"I'm going to hunt him up when I return," Weston answered.

"At Fort Myers, or here in the 'Glades?"

"Wherever he is," was the sententious reply. Suddenly resting on his paddle, he added:

"Wouldn't it be a great thing to spend a month with him here in the 'Glades? I've been thinking that we might make the trip sometime. I know he'd take us. We could work just for our board, or for a commission in the animals we caught."

"Do you think we could?" asked Otto in great earnestness.

"If he would take us, we could, and I don't think he'd object. He looked lonely when we left him, and we wouldn't be in the way."

"Then we must arrange it. I don't know of anything pleasanter than spending a month on his houseboat."

"Nor I; and I'm going to do it some time!"

This emphatic conclusion made Otto dig his paddle deep into the water, and with a sharp push he sent his canoe forward as he answered:

"Then I'm going to!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE boys covered many miles that day, paddling steadily and continuously until thoroughly tired. Late in the afternoon Weston began to study the embankment of the river for a good camping place.

"We've earned our rest," he said wearily, "and I'm going to get it."

"There's a dry, sandy place ahead," Otto replied.

"Then pull for it, and we'll build our camp."

They quickly drew their canoes out of the water and dumped their camping utensils on the dry, sandy spit of land that extended some distance out into the river. On this they built a fire, and within an incredibly short time they were cooking their meal. Otto was passionately fond of fishing, and he never felt too tired to try his luck with hook and line. The river abounded in fish almost as much as the swamp in game of all descriptions. There was little likelihood of any wanderer or hunter suffering for lack of sufficient to eat in such a paradise for game, and the boys felt as independent as though camping on the outskirts of civilization.

"The only thing that could threaten us would be lack of good drinking water," Weston had often explained. "Sometimes the water down here is too brackish and muddy to drink, and if you drink much of it sickness is almost sure to follow. We must look out for pure, clean water for drinking."

So far they had experienced little trouble in this respect, for numerous clear lakes and springs had been found, and they had drawn freely from them. But as they looked around now for some good drinking water they met their first trouble. There was no spring or lake near, and the muddy water of the river was out of the question for drinking.

Finally, after considerable tramping around, Weston announced: "We must take a trip inland and hunt for water. This will never do. Then we can fill up our water bottles and take some good water along for another such emergency."

They had been so careless of the future that little thought had been given to securing a water supply in advance, for each day they had found all they needed in abundance. The absence of any good supply now worried Weston more than it did his cousin. He knew the danger of their predicament if they should happen to be detained for long in a locality where no drinking water could be obtained.

"I'm not very thirsty yet," Otto grumbled, "and we need rest. Wait a little while before you go hunting for a spring."

"Then it may be too late," responded Weston. "You'll need the water badly when you get thirsty, and find you can't get it. No, I'm going now."

"I don't see why you make so much trouble out of a little thing," grumbled Otto, reluctantly rising from his seat to accompany his cousin.

"It may lead to a great thing before we are through," answered Weston.

Leaving their few things behind on the sand, they made their way into the swamp, forcing a path through densely-growing vines and trees. Great masses of tropical vegetation filled every part of the swamp, and made it impossible for them to see where they should place the next step.

"This is a mighty fine place for rattlesnakes," cautioned Otto, stepping gingerly along.

"No, rattlers don't stay in such wet places, but water moccasins do, and their venom is just as deadly as that of the rattler. So be careful."

"Don't think that caution is necessary," promptly returned Otto, "I'm so careful now that I almost stand still when I walk."

"Then step in my tracks, and you'll be all right."

"But let me warn you to be careful, cousin. I'd be in a pretty fix if you should die down here from snake poison. I couldn't find my way back to civilization."

"Never worry. I've hunted too long in this swamp to be caught by a snake."

Weston's confident words and voice were not relished by his cousin, and Otto answered a little viciously: "Better hunters than you have trampled on snakes, cousin, and your turn may come some day."

Weston ventured no reply. He was too busily engaged in trying to find a spring of fresh, clear water. Their search so far was not very well rewarded. The swamp grew thicker and more impenetrable as they proceeded, and the thorns of the strange vines and plants pricked them at nearly every step. More than once, as a thorn penetrated his skin, Otto jumped with a smothered exclamation of fear. The remembrance of his nearly fatal encounter with the rattler was so vivid in his mind that he was momentarily expecting another bite, and each prick of brier or thorn caused him to pale and tremble.

Finally, Weston stopped and mopped his perspiring forehead. He stood under the shade of a dense umbrella-shaped cabbage palmetto, with the vines and semi-tropical plants enclosing him on all sides. They were scarcely able to see half a dozen feet ahead. Standing almost ankle-deep in the mire and water, they presented a rather forlorn and unenviable appearance.

"Well, have you found the drinking water?" questoned Otto, resting against the side of a tall cypress, whose delicately-tinted head towered far above the surrounding vegetation. "I'm beginning to get thirsty now. This tramp through the swamp has made me think that water is after all essential to our happiness."

Weston smiled feebly, but for some moments he made no reply. Fanning himself with his hat, he waited until he was cooler and somewhat refreshed.

"We may be miles away from any spring or lake where the water is fit to drink," he remarked slowly. "If we can't find something soon, we must turn back, and hunt up Mr. Murphy's houseboat."

Otto's face brightened. Somehow the expedition had not appealed strongly to him, and the thoughts of their recent pleasant time on the floating ark caused him to answer quickly:

"That would be better than getting lost in this wilderness. The fact is, cousin, I'm getting a trifle homesick and tired of this terrible swamp. It seems to overpower me, and make me feel small and of little consequence. How easily we could die down here, and nobody would find it out for years."

"That isn't a very cheerful subject of conversation just at this time. We might easily die here of thirst, and—"

Otto looked thoroughly alarmed at this announcement, and when he saw the grave face of his cousin he knew that their position was not a very desirable one.

"You don't think we're really in danger, cousin?" he stammered.

Weston shook his head.

"How long can you go without water?" Weston asked.

"About two or three hours longer, but I should prefer not to wait even that long."

"Some hunters have gone for two or three days without water in this swamp," quietly added Weston, "and then in their desperation they have drunk of the pools and streams that flow through the woods. The water seemed to satisfy them, and they kept on drinking, wondering why they did not take of it before. But within a few hours they had the swamp fever, and they died raving and cursing. I don't know which kind of death is preferable."

Otto tried to accept this harrowing tale as a joke, but from the serious expression on the speaker's face he knew that it was not intended as a jest.

"You think we may die here of thirst or fever?" he began a little tremulously.

"No, I don't think anything of the kind," exclaimed Weston with sudden animation. "We cannot afford to think of death. We must go ahead and find water. Come, we're losing time!"

"Isn't it safer to return to our canoes and go back to the houseboat?"

"We wouldn't get back there before to-morrow noon, and then we'd be too weak to paddle. No, we must find water here."

Weston did not wait for further words. He realized the danger of delay, and immediately took up the search again. In a few minutes he stopped again, and said:

"I'm going to climb this old cypress, and see if I can get an idea of the swamp around here. There are many fresh water lakes in the swamp that will give up all the drinking water we need. Probably I can find one nearby."

"I'm gong to climb up with you," Otto answered.

They deposited their guns and coats at the foot of the tree, and swiftly climbed up among the lower branches. It was not a difficult tree to climb, and both boys made their way up from branch to branch with the agility of squirrels. Weston took the lead and Otto followed close behind.

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CHAPTER XV.

THE solitary cypress growing out of the wet, swampy soil, towered twenty feet above the surrounding trees. The top branches were draped with gay festoons of Spanish moss, the parasitic growth hanging in dense masses from gaunt, lifeless limbs. The tree had struggled nobly against this twining, clinging moss, which year by year had crept closer to its huge trunk, shutting out the sunlight and air until half its erect form was smothered and slowly dying.

The heart of the tree was still green and firm. The tender young leaves of vivid green sprouted out on branches which swayed gently alongside of those which had long since been robbed of all life and nourishment. The contrast between the two—between life and death—was characteristic of the great sweating, reeking swamp, with its tropical vegetation and miasmatic pools and lagoons. Decay and life were everywhere visible, one contrasting with the other until they seemed essential parts of existence.

The boys climbed upward rapidly, but carefully, testing each limb to see if it was secure, and brushing away the great masses of tangled vines and plants. Gradually as they ascended above the tops of the lower trees, their eyes took in a broader sweep of the Everglades. At first they could see little else than waving lines of vegetation, ribbed and broken here and there by some giant clump of cypress or pine. A few vultures flew heavily from the neighboring bushes, and in the distance their dark outlines formed blurs on the landscape.

There was no sign of water, river, lagoon or lake. Weston looked disappointed, but climbing higher he saw that the sparkling surface of the river was well off to the right, while not far to the left was the broad stretch of one of those beautiful inland lakes of clear water that make southern Florida famous. Like a gem in an ocean of green it lay, sparkling in the clear sun like burnished steel.

Balboa from the top of his mountain range never felt greater joy at discovering the Pacific than did the two boys in thus suddenly catching a glimpse of the lake ahead. To Weston this meant more than to Otto, and he could not restrain himself from exclaiming:

"There's water! We're all right!"

Otto was disposed to express himself less enthusiastically, and in a scoffing tone he replied: "I thought there was water all around us. I've been wading ankle deep in water for the past hour."

"Yes, but that was hardly fit to drink."

"How do you know the water ahead is any better? I can't see much difference."

Weston looked his disgust.

"Oh, you'll see when you get there. That lake is as pure as crystal, with sandy bottom, and water as cool as if flowing from an ice-cooler."

"I'm going down then," replied Otto, "for I'm thirsty, and it makes my lips dry to think of it."

"Yes, we'll hurry down," Weston answered.

They turned to descend the tree, and had one foot placed on a lower branch when their eyes suddenly caught sight of something unusual on the lake. In the clear atmosphere they could see distinctly a great distance, and objects miles away were outlined sharply against the background of green and gray. At first they halted simultaneously, and gazed in the same direction without speaking.

"Is it some animal down there after a drink?" finally queried Otto, shading his eyes from the bright sunlight.

"That is no animal," replied Weston. "It's a man, but I can't make out just what he is doing."

"Looks as if he was trying to creep upon something. Isn't it one of your plume-hunters?"

"No, it doesn't look like a hunter. He isn't dressed like any plume-hunter I ever met down here."

In the distance the dark object was creeping stealthily along the shore of the lake, hiding frequently among the bushes, and watching and waiting. The edges of the lake were sandy, but the branches and vines extended over the banks so far that the figure could easily conceal itself from view.

"He's evidently trying to stalk something," remarked Weston slowly. "Possibly there's a deer somewhere around, and he's trying to crawl upon him. But he certainly acts like a greenhorn."

"I'd almost think," began Otto hesitatingly, "that it was some man I've met before. He looks familiar."

"Does he?" asked Weston, turning a puzzled face toward his cousin.

"Yes, I'm sure I've seen him somewhere. I have it now, cousin. It's the man who tried to steal our canoe."

"You're right, Otto," replied Weston. "I thought so, but I was not sure, and I wanted to see if it struck you the same."

"Then he means no good. He's up to some mischief."

"Don't see what mischief he can do down there. More likely he's been hunting for drinking water, and has just found the lake. He was a stranger in these swamps, and he'd know less about finding a lake than I do."

"But he certainly is after something."

"He's starved out, and is trying to kill some game with that little toy gun of his. Now see him shoot; he's aiming his weapon. Ten to one he'll miss."

"I don't know," replied Otto dubiously. "He knew how to shoot, and his game may be large."

Weston gazed intently toward the distant lake, scanning every part of its sand-encircled rim, but he saw nothing until his eyes rested on a thick clump of bushes not a dozen yards from the creeping man. There was a dark object in the water that might easily have passed for a fallen tree, or possibly a floating alligator. Weston was deceived at first, and thought that the object was only a log; but a moment later he pointed excitedly toward it, and exclaimed:

"There's a canoe, cousin—an Indian canoe moored in the bushes!"

Otto looked in the direction indicated, and asked:

"How do you know it's an Indian canoe? I see it, but it looks like a log or tree from here."

"Yes, because it is fashioned out of a cypress trunk. It's the way the Seminoles make their canoes. I'm sure it's one."

"And our old enemy there is trying to steal it?"

"Or owns it. I don't know which. We'll see in a moment."

If the man owned the canoe he was taking unusual precautions to approach it. The boys could see that every step was carefully timed and measured. The man was certainly afraid of alarming somebody or something; but whether it was some human being or a wild animal the boys could not imagine.

"If it is his he stole it," suddenly growled Weston, "and I've a mind to shout and frighten away his game. He has no business in this swamp, and the sooner we can drive him out the better."

"Oh, if he's only trying to kill some bird or animal for food let him alone," cheerfully replied Otto. "I don't want anything more to do with him. Let him go in peace."

Weston was of the same mind, but he did not like the actions of the man, and said as much again. They watched him a few moments longer. He reached a secure hiding place near the clump of bushes, and paused, peering through the branches intently. In another moment there was a sharp report, followed by the immediate disappearance of the man.

"There, he's shot his game," Weston said. "Now he can cook it."

"But will he leave the lake soon?" asked Otto. "I'm thirsty, but I don't care to meet that man."

"We can walk around to the other side of the lake and he won't see us. I wonder what he is doing now!"

"Seems a long time getting his game. I don't believe he killed it—missed it, I guess, or wounded it, and he's chasing it in the swamp."

"Hope he'll have a long chase. If it only turned out to be a black bear now instead of a deer or wild turkey there would be some fun, for I don't imagine that chap knows much about handling bears."

"We might go down and help him then," responded Otto. "It would be heaping coals of fire on his head to save him from the death clutches of a big bear."

Once more they put a foot on the lower branch to descend, and again they were stopped by unexpected developments in the view. The man appeared from the shadows of the swamp, and hastily unfastened the canoe. When he took up the paddle, and rapidly turned the boat out into the middle of the lake, the two boys looked at one another in surprise.

"Well, what's the matter?" asked Otto.

"He's got his game," answered Weston; "but I don't see why he doesn't make a fire and cook it."

"Guess he isn't as hungry as we thought he was, or he has a camp on the opposite side of the lake."

"I'm going down there anyway to find out what he was doing," said Weston, with sudden determination. "His actions were so strange that I'm curious to find out more about him. Let's hurry down."

This time they descended without interruption. Once on the ground again, they picked up their guns and under Weston's lead they hurried through the swamp toward the lake. The tangled bushes and vines made progress slow, but after a few more yards of difficult traveling they found the ground sandy and sloping upward. It was the beginning of the higher ridge of earth which formed the embankment for the inland lake.

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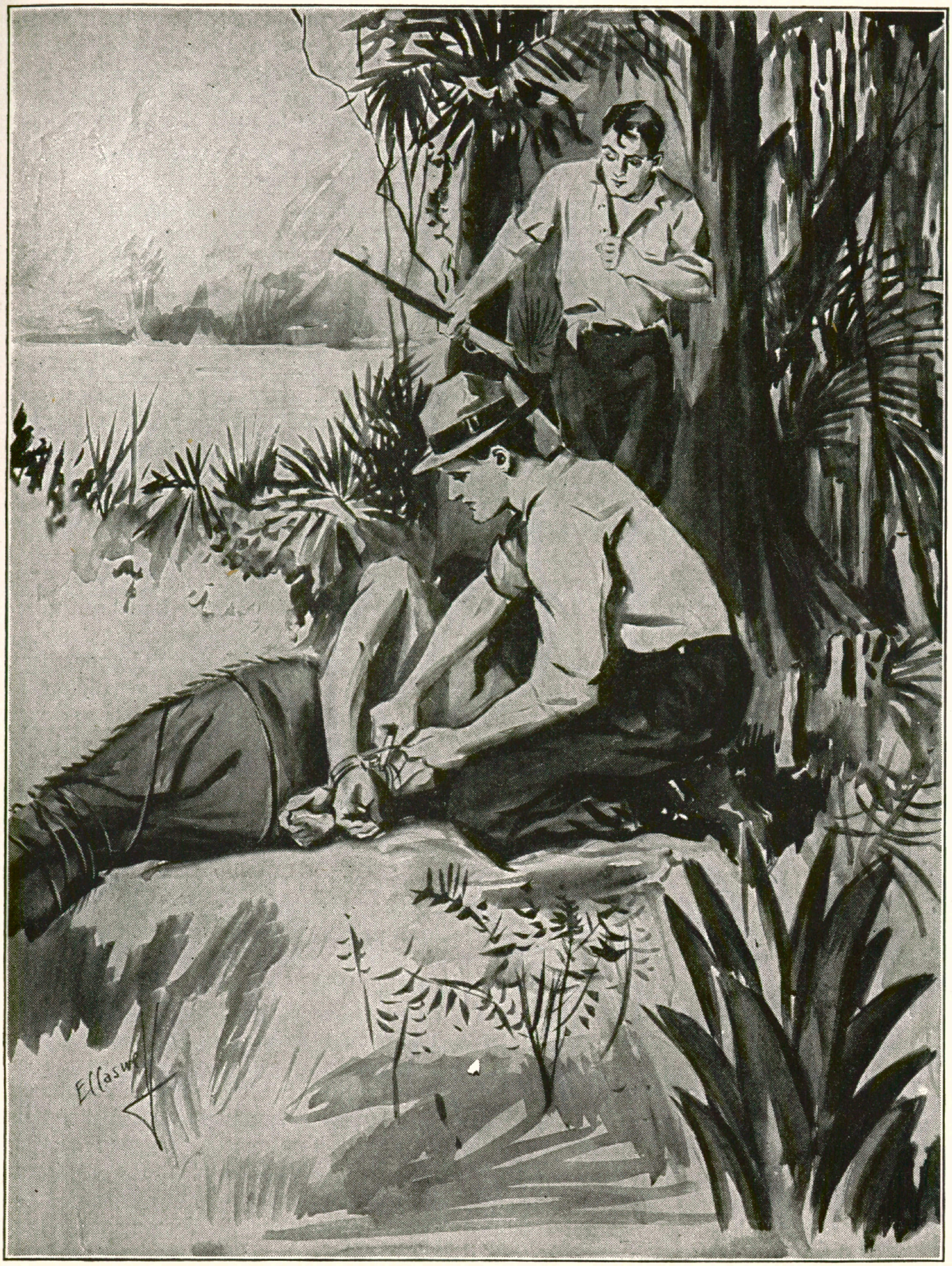
CHAPTER XVI.

THE lake was a beautiful stretch of water, encircled by cypress and pine trees, and rimmed with a sloping shore of sand, which offered an agreeable



WESTON CUT THE ROPE WHICH BOUND THE INDIAN'S HANDS AND LEGS.

contrast to the mud and muck of the swamp through which the boys had been toiling. The firm ridge of sandy earth supported the feet, and the absence of all water and miry soil gave a sensation of buoyancy that was pleasant to experience. Otto stamped his feet on sand, and exclaimed:

"I never realized how precious sand was before. Ugh! that muddy swamp makes me sick."

"Did you ever see a prettier lake, cousin?" asked Weston, pushing the thick screen of bushes aside so they could get a fine view of the stretch of water.

"Beautiful!" exclaimed Otto. "And as good to drink as it looks."

"Yes, better," returned Weston.

They stepped down to the edge, and quickly quenched their thirst, drinking until they could hold no more. The water was cool and clear, and the boys sipped it up with their hands, and sprinkled it over their hands and face, wasting it with a sensation of luxury and extravagance that innocently but forcibly expressed their relief. They stood for some time bathing and lapping the water as if loath to leave it. Weston finally straightened himself, and said:

"Well, now we must find out what that man was doing on the beach near that big pine. I marked that tree from our perch, and he landed near it."

"We may find his game," Otto suggested. "Probably it was a deer, and he intends to return for it."

"Whatever it is, we'll find out. But I wonder where he got his boat. He certainly must have stolen that somewhere."

The two boys pushed their way reluctantly through the bushes, and soon lost sight of the lake again. Weston, by keeping the big pine tree constantly in view, worked his way across a neck of the ridge until they emerged from the thickets on the beach nearly opposite.

"There's where his boat was fastened," Weston said, pointing to a shelving cove in the lake.

"Then his target must have been somewhere in the bushes over there."

"Yes, he aimed straight from the lake to—to—"

Weston halted in his speech, and pointed sharply toward a dense screen of bushes. Otto, following the direction of his hand, exclaimed:

"What is it? A deer, bear, or wild-cat?"

"No, it looks like a man!"

They hesitated the fraction of a second when this discovery was announced, but they had met with too many strange adventures to show fear very long. They stepped carefully through the bushes, and as Weston parted them they saw a strange sight.

Lying at full length on the ground was the body of an Indian. His head was turned from the boys, and they could not recognize his features. There was a pool of blood near by, and they instantly reached the conclusion that murder had been committed.

Like a flash the truth dawned upon them. The white man had shot the Indian in order to steal his boat. But to make sure of his dastardly deed he had bound the Seminole hand and foot. He lay there on his side, with the blood trickling from his wound, unable to move to a more comfortable position.

The color of the boys' faces grew a shade whiter, and even through their tan they looked pale and frightened. Otto whispered:

"Is he dead?"

"I don't know, but we must find out."

Their own words reassured them, and they hurried to the side of the prostrate Indian. Weston cut the rope which bound the Indian's hands and legs, and then tenderly rolled him over. A groan escaped the Seminole's lips, and the eyes stared straight at the boys.

"No, he's not dead," Weston said.

"Why, he's the Indian who saved my life!" Otto exclaimed excitedly. "See his osprey plume! Yes, it's the same one!"

"Bring some water from the lake then, and we'll try to revive him," Weston answered. "We must save him if it is possible."

The Indian was too weak from loss of blood and his strained attitude to speak, and he closed his eyes wearily; but when the boys bathed his face in the cool water, and forced some between his lips, he looked up with more animation.

Weston rubbed the arms and legs, where the rope had cut deep in the flesh, stopping all circulation and making the agony of the man tenfold greater.

"Now we must look at his wound," he announced. "Roll him over gently while I rip up his leggings. The bullet has hit him in the hip, and not in any vital place."

The Indian quietly resigned himself to their manipulations, and within a few minutes the wound was washed clear of all dirt and clotted blood. Weston placed a bandage on it, and drawing this tight around the body he stopped further loss of blood.

"There, I think he's out of danger now."

The Indian was placed in a comfortable position, the boys gathering soft leaves and pine boughs to make his bed easier. Following them dumbly with his eyes, the Indian showed his appreciation of their efforts to save him; but he made no sign to speak.

"Are you in much pain?" asked Otto finally, leaning over the Seminole.

The Indian only stared at him.

"Oh, I forgot he couldn't speak English. How unfortunate that he doesn't know a little of our language! I think if I was a public educator I'd make it compulsory for every Indian and foreigner in this country to learn to read and speak English."

Weston smiled, and answered:

"You'd have a hard job making the Seminoles attend your schools. They don't take much stock in the English language or American people and their ways. And to-day's experience with this one isn't going to help his faith in us very much."

"No, a few scoundrels like this thief and murderer can do more toward making the Indian skeptical of any good in the white man than all our efforts could counteract in a year. What was the big word he said about white man being no good?"

"'Istahatka holwaugus stah,'" replied Weston, in an effort to reproduce the guttural accent of the Seminole.

The prostrate Indian looked up, and suddenly shook his head. Then partly supporting his head on his hands, he said:

"Big white man no good. He shoot when back turned. Me like you. You help poor Indian."

The boys stared in surprise. The Indian had been feigning all along, and if he could speak broken English he could also understand it. Naturally Otto and Weston recalled in a flash the substance of their conversation. They breathed a sigh of relief when they realized that they had said nothing that could be interpreted by the wounded Seminole as derogatory to him or his tribe. Weston recovered his presence of mind first, and replied:

"We thought Indian unable to speak English."

"Me no speak it well. Only little. White man never friend of Indian. His words nothing but lies. Some better. They speak truth, and they help Indian. Osprey Feather never forget."

"Your name is Osprey Feather?" queried Otto with sudden interest.

"Me big chief's friend. He make me chief some day. Like the osprey, me hunt well, and kill quick."

"How did you get this wound?" Weston asked when the Indian stopped.

An expression of disgust spread over the copper-colored face. He seemed to grunt out his words:

"Bad white man creep upon me, and shoot. He no let me see him. He bind me when weak and losing blood. Then he run away with canoe. He go over there. But me follow him. He bad man."

"Yes, he is a bad man," Weston rejoined. "He tried to steal our boat one day, and we had to fight to get it back. I wonder what he's up to anyway in this swamp. He's no hunter or trapper."

"No, he no hunt; he just shoot Indian when back is turned."

"Well, if we run across him again, I think we'll try to capture him," remarked Weston thoughtfully.

The Seminole shook his head gravely, and said: "Me go hunting for him. He no escape. Me find him."

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CHAPTER XVII.

OSPREY FEATHER, the young Seminole, was not so badly wounded as the boys supposed, and within a short time he announced his intention of starting off on the trail of the man who had tried to kill him. Weston and Otto remained with the Indian until late in the afternoon, building a fire and cooking some fresh fish and birds for their dinner. By the side of the lake they found it easy to pass away the time, and Osprey Feather proved a veritable storehouse of swamp lore and knowledge. Once aroused from his apathy, the Indian talked freely, showing neither fear nor suspicion. The boys had shown their friendship to him in the one way that everlastingly binds a true Indian to his white brother. They had saved his life at the opportune moment, and there was little chance of his ever forgetting it. He said this over several times in the course of the morning's conversation, and each repetition seemed to add to his sense of gratefulness.

"You saved my life first," Otto responded once when the Indian renewed his promised allegiance to them. "If you hadn't helped me at that time, I should have died of snake poison."

Osprey Feather shook his head. Something like a grim smile—if an Indian ever smiles—broadened his face. He looked away a moment, as if debating whether or not to speak; and then turned his face slowly toward the boys.

"Me no save you from snake bite," he said quietly. "It no rattlesnake that bit. Just water snake. He no poison; heap bad bite, but no kill. Osprey Feather know that."

The two boys stared incredulously at the speaker.

"You mean to tell me that I was in no danger?" gasped Otto, rising to his feet. "It was no rattlesnake bite?"

The Indian shook his head negatively. It was hard to believe the truth of this startling statement, and Otto continued skeptically:

"How do you know? You didn't see the snake!"

"No, but me see the bite. It no rattlesnake bite. Just water snake bite. Heap painful, but no kill."

Otto turned toward his cousin. "Do you believe that, Weston?" he asked.

"I think we must, cousin, if Osprey Feather says it. He should know. The Seminole Indians know every snake and creature in these swamps, and they are rarely deceived."

"Then what a pretty scare we had for nothing. I think I could almost laugh over it now. And your famous rattlesnake medicine was bogus after all?"

He turned toward Osprey Feather, who had retained impassive silence. He looked up now, and replied:

"It helps water-snake bite. No good for rattlesnake bite. He strike here or here"—indicating vital portions of the body—"no medicine cure. White man must die."

"How about an Indian? Would it kill him, too?"

"Big Bear die that way many moons ago. No medicine help him. Medicine man dance all night, but he die. Red Squirrel's squaw die; no medicine save her. Bad bite; Indian die. White man, too."

Otto listened in silence. "Then all this talk about Indian medicine curing rattlesnake bite is bosh," he said. "I always thought they knew more than we did about such matters."

"There are a good many illusions that might be exploded in the same way," Weston replied, laughing at his cousin's seriousness. "A good many Indian stories, I imagine, start the way this one did. If we hadn't met Osprey Feather again, I think we would have told everybody that the Seminole Indians had a sure cure for rattlesnake poison, and here we find that we are mistaken."

Somewhat crestfallen by the discovery that he was not such a hero as he had thought, Otto sat down again, and quietly contemplated the blazing campfire. Weston looked curiously at him once, and said:

"I wouldn't be so disappointed, Otto. I know it's hard to think you were nearly killed by a rattler, and then find it was all a mistake. It's much better that way than to have been bitten by the real thing. Then, according to Osprey Feather, you would have been dead long ago."

"Yes, I am foolish," Otto responded; "but it all seemed so real and vivid that it's hard to believe I was mistaken. Besides, I saw the snake, and—Weston—I don't think I was mistaken. It was just like the rattlers that Mr. Murphy had aboard his houseboat."

Osprey Feather appeared not to notice this reflection upon his truthfulness, but a moment later he rose somewhat stiffly from his seat, and said:

"Me go soon. The hurt all over. Me go after bad white man."

"Not yet," interposed Weston, fearing that Otto's words had offended him. "My white brother here is just as thankful to you for helping him when the water-snake bit him as if it had been a rattler."

"Yes, yes," suddenly responded Otto. "I didn't mean to doubt your word, Osprey Feather, and I don't now. But it came so suddenly that it took some time to believe it. Now I know you were right. I'm thankful—very thankful! If we could do anything for you—"

"White brother save Indian's life," was the dignified reply. "Me never forget that."

"Then, listen, Osprey Feather," interrupted Weston, "we have a favor to ask of you. We want to see your chief—big chief Billy Bowlegs. Where can we find him?"

A flash of suspicion crossed the Seminole's face, but only for an instant. Then it vanished, leaving the face as impassive as before.

"We want to see him at once," Weston continued, deciding now to unfold his plan to the young Indian. "He may save us a lot of trouble. My father is a surveyor, and—"

The sudden recollection that it was Osprey Feather they had seen removing the stakes made Weston dumb. They had not actually caught him in the act of changing the stakes, but circumstantial evidence pointed to his culpability. For an instant Weston stammered, and turned red. He was not sure whether it would be policy to proceed; but finally deciding that honesty was the only way out of the difficulty he added:

"My father has twice surveyed this swamp, and the Indians have moved the stakes each time. I want to see your big chief and ask him if he will not stop it. I don't think he understands, or he would not put us to so much trouble."

Osprey Feather had remained impassively silent, but there were indications of uncomfortable thoughts passing through his mind. Once he shifted his weight from one foot to the other, and his steady, eagle-like eyes glanced from the face of the speaker to some distant speck on the lake. For an Indian these signs plainly indicated a troubled mind.

"You understand why the stakes were

placed in the swamp?" Weston asked, wishing to make himself understood. "It's this way, Osprey Feather: we divide the land up into sections, and mark them, and then write them down on a big map at Washington. There anybody can study them, and know where Big Cypress is, or where Cow Creek is situated, or where Okeechobee is located. We can point to this section, and say there's where the Seminoles have their village."

Making diagrams on the sand with a stick, Weston sought to make his explanations simple and graphic; but as he looked up once he saw that the Indian's suspicion was deeper and keener than ever. Still he was silent, showing neither surprise nor interest. That he was following Weston's words keenly, however, there was no doubt; but he was not sure of the real meaning of the stakes in the swamp. He was too shrewd an Indian to give away his suspicions, and he waited for Weston to continue, nodding his head with sage approval.

"The white men are at peace with the Seminoles," Weston began again on a different line of argument "and they do not want to take their lands from them. But they want to know how much land there is down here, and how much is under water. We will never send the soldiers against them again. That was a mistake made many years ago, and the Great Father at Washington is a wise and good man. He wants only to do justice to the Seminoles."

The Indian grunted, giving vent to a deep guttural "Ugh!" that made Otto smile. It was so distinctly an indication of skepticism that it was difficult for either boy to keep a straight face.

Weston rose from his seat on the sand, and added: "I see you don't believe me, Osprey Feather. I don't know how I am going to convince you or your big chief. But I must in some way. That is my mission down here. If I don't succeed my father will be ruined. If the Indians do not leave the stakes alone, the Great Father at Washington will not pay him."

There was a note of disappointment in the speaker's voice which affected the Indian more than all of his words. With sudden animation, Osprey Feather replied:

"Me understand. But when did Indians move stakes? Did white man see them?"

"I thought it was some white hunter at first," Weston answered. "I didn't know why anybody should touch the stakes, but—but—one day I saw an Indian near the stakes, and when he was gone the stakes were not there. Then I knew that your people were causing all the trouble. They were afraid that the stakes were put there to lead the soldiers to the Indian villages again. Were they not, Osprey Feather?"

There was no direct answer to this. Osprey Feather limped toward the edge of the lake. Pointing across it he said:

"Bad white man go over there. Me must find his trail."

He picked up his gun, and turned toward the edge of the thicket. This abrupt departure disconcerted the two boys. Weston's face showed his disappointment plainly. For a few moments he had nothing to say.

"Me return some day," Osprey Feather added. "Me never forget. Me help some day."

With these parting words of vague promise, the Seminole glided into the thicket and vanished almost immediately from sight. He limped slightly from the wound in his thigh, but he was clearly able to take care of himself.

"He's more interested in seeking vengeance than in helping you, cousin," Otto remarked in a despondent voice. "I'm free to confess I'm disappointed in him. I expected great things from him."

"He promised to help us," Weston replied softly, striving to gather some little comfort from this.

"Yes, but what is a promise—and a very indefinite one at that?"

Weston sighed, and looked blankly and

painfully at the part of the swamp where Osprey Feather had last been seen.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

THE return to the Caloosahatchie where the boys had left their canoes was begun shortly after the Seminole left them, and before sundown they reached it, carrying with them a liberal supply of pure drinking water. The trip had been a quiet but disturbing one. Weston was busy going over and over in his mind the words of his conversation with the Seminole. A dozen times he wished he had made his plea different. He was surprised and irritated at his stupidity. If he could not make a better presentation of his case before Billy Bowlegs, what reason had he to expect that the Seminole chief would listen to his petition?

Otto was nearly as disappointed as his cousin, but he did not blame him for the failure to get any response from Osprey Feather. On the contrary he attributed it all to the dense stupidity or unwillingness of the Indian. He was somewhat surprised when Weston broke out irritably:

"Why didn't you say something to help me, cousin? Had you helped me we might have made Osprey Feather understand."

"What more could I say than you?" asked Otto.

"I was excited and didn't say half enough. I couldn't make him understand."

Otto smiled, and added: "I think, cousin, he did understand, and he knew that we knew he was caught in the act of pulling up the stakes. His conscience troubled him, and that's why he wanted to leave us so abruptly."

Weston was not satisfied. He shook his head in dejection. "Well, we've failed with him. Now we must hunt up Billy Bowlegs, and present our case better. I won't fail the next time."

"Then you're going farther up the river?"

"Yes, I'm going up until I strike Lake Okeechobee, and then we'll cross it, and hunt up the Seminoles in the lower Cypress Swamp."

"Have you ever crossed the lake before?" asked Otto, with some misgivings, for he had heard a good deal about the great, shoreless, inland sea.

"No, I was never on it before, but I know how to reach it, and what to do when we get there. We certainly can't die from thirst, for the waters of the lake are as clear as crystal. I've heard plume-hunters say that it was the best drinking water in Florida."

"But how about something to eat? We can't live on water alone."

"The lake is full of fish, and there is plenty of game all around. We can't starve if we have our guns and fishing-tackle along."

"No, I'll catch fish, and I guess you can shoot enough birds; but how shall we cook them? You say there is no shore to the lake!"

"We'll probably find some islands in it where we can camp. Anyway I'm going to find Billy Bowlegs before I return."

There was stubborn determination in the boy's looks and words, and Otto knew that it was useless to discuss the matter further with him. Besides, the adventurous spirit was pretty strong within him, and the thought of paddling on the great, inland, shoreless sea, where few white men had ever been, appealed to him. From all accounts he imagined the sea to be many miles across, perhaps too great for them to navigate in less than a week, and encircled by tall saw-grass, and great cypress trees. The shore, he knew, extended gradually back from the lake, and it was possible to reach it only by passing through miles of grass and aquatic plants growing in many feet of water.

The Caloosahatchie is the natural drainage stream for the great lake. Okeechobee is far above the sea level, and the current of the river flows steadily, and sometimes swiftly, toward the Gulf of Mexico. During the rainy season its swollen tide makes navigation upstream a slow and tortuous process.

But the river was low now—unusually low, Weston said—and they found in places scarcely any current. Where it broadened out to the size of a lake or bay, it was possible to paddle along the shore without experiencing any force from the current.

Their journey, renewed on the morning, was therefore much faster than they had anticipated. Gradually the swamp grew different in character. The shores appeared in places very elusive. They would attempt to land, but find nothing except tall saw-grass growing in water four and five feet deep. Pushing their way through this grass they would in time find low, swampy soil, which was barely firm enough to hold their weight. The trees and plants seemed to find nourishment in this thin surface of soil, and the vegetation grew denser and more luxuriant.

Wading birds stood on the marshy edges of the shores, or played hide-and-seek among the tall reeds. Alligators abounded, sunning themselves on fallen tree trunks, or gliding slowly through the water, with just the tips of their snouts visible above the surface. Steaming mists rose from the watery swamp and river, hanging like a pall in places as the dense fog of a sea.

"I shouldn't think this was a healthy place," remarked Otto, as the wild primitiveness of the scene began to oppress him.

"No, it isn't, unless you're careful," Weston replied truthfully. "If you should camp at night time here without a covering, you might wake up in the morning with every bone in your body aching, and by noon you'd have a high fever. If you protect yourself at night from the heavy dews and mist, eat wholesome food, and drink only pure water, you might spend a year in the swamp and not be sick."

"The Indians are hardened to the climate and moist air, I suppose," Otto added.

"Yes, and so are the plume-hunters. They know what to do to keep themselves healthy. It's the visitor here for the first time who is generally taken sick. He's either careless or ignorant of the simple rules for camping in a swamp."

"Then I'm going to follow your advice, cousin. I don't care to get the swamp fever."

"We'll have to hunt diligently for a good camping place to-night. We're getting pretty well away from the shore, and this saw-grass grows denser."

There was just a note of anxiety in Weston's voice, and Otto was quick to detect it. He looked up a little apprehensively, and then around at the interminable sea of grass and reeds. They had drifted away from the main channel of the stream, and had paddled into one of the numerous bayous that open into the Caloosahatchie. These bayous are exceedingly deceptive, often broadening so they resemble great inland lakes or rivers. The river divided into branches and arms that wound in and out among the tall reeds and grass, and many times it was impossible to keep to the right channel. More than once they paddled up a branch which suddenly brought them to a halt, for the bayou would end in a little cove, or bay, with no outlet in any direction other than the one by which they entered.

They were now in a bayou broader than usual, which seemed to open into a series of similar bodies of water. The outlook was so puzzling that Weston rested on his paddle and studied the situation in silence.

"I'm not sure that we're on the river," he said finally. "I think we've taken the wrong direction."

"I don't see how you can tell anyway," Otto responded.

"It's difficult, but there should be some current in the river, and there's none at all here. See, we don't drift in any direction, and that leaf in the water stands perfectly still."

They watched the leaf and their own boats. They apparently stood perfectly still. Occasionally a light puff of wind rippled the surface of the bayou and drifted their boats toward the right line of saw-grass.

"No, we certainly don't drift with any current," Otto volunteered after several minutes of absolute silence.

"Then we must get back to the main channel. We can't afford to get far from it, or we might wander around in these bayous for ages."

"How can we tell which way to paddle to reach the river again?" queried Otto anxiously.

Weston shrugged his shoulders.

"We must go back the way we came," he replied.

"A very good reply, cousin, but tell me how you're going to do that. We're not in the swamp, and we've left no trail behind. There are no broken twigs and trampled grass to show where we stepped."

"No, but there's the sun. We were rowing directly in the opposite direction from it, and here's my compass to prove that we should paddle across this bayou."

"Yes, and that will land us in the reed-grass opposite. We certainly didn't paddle through there."

"We must have skirted around it. We'll go back a little, and find another outlet that will lead us due east."

Weston having settled the matter in his own mind, took up his paddle again, and quickly ran the boat back a few hundred yards, and when they found an opening in the sea of grass and reeds, he shouted:

"I thought so! Here's the channel we paddled through!"

"I don't remember it," Otto answered dubiously. "We never ran so close to the reeds. I remember distinctly that we kept far away from the banks, and here the stream is so narrow that we can't get more than a dozen feet from either side."

"Oh, you were probably dreaming when we passed through here," Weston responded lightly.

Nevertheless, after they had paddled along for ten minutes, a look of doubt dawned upon his face. The scenery was certainly unfamiliar. They were running into a series of wide bayous fringed with clumps of low-growing bushes and palmettoes. The boys glanced at these, and up at the sun. It was late in the afternoon, and the puzzling situation made both of them think of rest and refreshments.

"Anyway," Weston exclaimed, "we've found a decent place to pitch camp. Those bushes and palmettoes show that we've found land that isn't under water. I'm tired, and need rest. Probably in the morning I can find the way back to the river without trouble."

Otto was disposed to rest also, and, although a little worried by the thought that they were lost, he prepared to land and find a camping place without a word of dissent.

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CHAPTER XIX.

THEIR camping place was one of the numerous small islands that dot the everglades and great cypress swamp. It stood a foot or two out of the water, and was covered with a dense growth of myrtle, cypress and palmettoes. When they pushed their canoes up to it they found it inhabited by a large population. Thousands of ducks, herons and egrets flapped their wings, and rose in the air with loud screams and chatter. Alligators, disturbed in their peaceful rest, lashed the water with their tails, and opened and snapped their huge jaws. A few wild turkeys ran into the thickets in fright, and an old gobbler uttered a challenge that sounded unreasonably absurd.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Otto. "We've struck a city of wild birds and animals! I don't know that I care to sleep with such strange bed-fellows."

"They'll furnish us with excellent food," answered practical Weston. "See those plump ducks. We must have one for supper."

The ducks had been feeding on the wild rice and berries of the swamp, and they were certainly fat and savory. The boys found to their satisfaction that the rest of the birds, after the first alarm, took themselves quietly to other parts of the island, and settled down peacefully for the night. A few venturesome alligators poked their noses along the edge of the island and gazed inquisitively at them.

"Don't suppose they ever saw a man before," Weston remarked. "Don't know what a delicious morsel a leg makes. We mustn't give them a taste, or they'll start in to finish us."

However, the alligators were not disposed to push their investigation beyond a certain line of safety. They seemed to invite the boys into the water, but they were not willing to venture far on the land. They examined the canoes critically, and one even showed a disposition to climb in it.

"Here, get back, you lubber!" shouted Weston, knocking the great saurian across the nose with a stick. "That canoe isn't a sunning log."

The big creature dropped back into the water with a vicious snap of his teeth, and the two boys pulled their canoes from the water. There was no further alarm during the rest of the afternoon and night. Weston pitched their sheltering canvas near the densest part of the thicket, and protected by a network of vines and branches almost as impenetrable as a wall of steel they slept quietly and peacefully. At an unusually early hour in the morning they were roused from their slumbers by the chatter of the birds, which roosted on the island in such numbers that their nests were scattered around like pebbles on the seashore. It was almost impossible for the boys to walk through the thicket without crushing nests filled with eggs or young birds.

The parent birds were flying round by early daybreak in search of their breakfast, and their noisy screechings banished all sleep.

"This racket is worse than a Fourth of July at home," grawled Otto, sitting up and rubbing his eyes. "I wish these birds would wait until a decent hour before beginning their day's quarreling."

"We haven't any right to object," responded Weston. "The island belongs to them by rights, and we're interlopers. Therefore, we should accommodate ourselves to the ways of the owners."

"How is it that the plume-hunters have not discovered this colony? I suppose if they did, this scene would soon be turned into a wholesale slaughter-house. Ugh! I can't forget that pitiful sight that Mr. Murphy showed us. Those poor herons must have thought the plume-hunters were horrible animals, to slay them as they did."

"These birds are not afraid of us. You can almost pick them up with your hands. It's too bad that some day they will be frightened and killed, and then after that they will dread the sight of man."

Otto stretched himself and walked from the tent to the edge of the water. A dozen herons and egrets were wading in it, fishing silently and successfully for their breakfast. A score of noisy, clamorous nestlings were calling for food. Slowly, one after another, the parent birds stalked forth from the water with fish in their bills, and deposited them in the cavernous mouths opened to receive them.

Once Otto stood between the nestling and parent heron, and watched the silent bird stare at him. She finally quietly walked around and brushed fearlessly against him to reach her young. The boy touched the snowy plume of the bird, but only for an instant, as the heron quivered at the touch and hopped to one side. Then in perfect fearlessness she proceeded to feed her nestling, and did not fiy away until the process was finished.

"Well, if you want any further proof that birds are not naturally afraid of man you're more skeptical than I am," Otto exclaimed with sudden warmth. "I could have picked that heron in my arms. I never saw such a tame bird."

"They're all that way," Weston explained. "The hunters have not been here, and they don't know what fear of man is. Evidently they take us for some strange animals, which they will believe harmless until we have proved ourselves otherwise."

"Then what a pity to destroy that faith! Some day, I suppose, it will cost the birds dearly."

"Yes, poor things, they're too trusting."

The island on which they found themselves was scarcely more than a dozen acres in extent, but thousands of birds roosted and nested on it. The boys walked round it, carefully making their way through the thick brush to avoid breaking eggs or treading upon young birds. The ground was literally covered with nests, while the small bushes and trees were black with them, built in tiers one upon another. There were small and large nests, the cranes, egrets, and herons taking possession of the ground and stout branches of the trees, while the smaller birds, such as the robins, mocking-birds, orioles, bullfinches, cardinals, and nonpareils, built in the swinging top branches. Every available space had apparently been utilized by the birds for their nests, and the island was divided up among them by mutual consent.

Otto laughed at the ingenuity of some of the birds in crowding nests into small nooks and corners. "I should think some of them coming home late at night would get on the wrong nest. How do you suppose they know their own? Now look at this tree. Here are a dozen nests full of speckled blue eggs. Everyone is the same, and they're all crowded together in a little space. Do you suppose the birds ever make a mistake in finding their own eggs?"

Weston smiled as he answered: "Don't you live in an apartment in New York? Yes; well, did you ever get mixed up, and land in the wrong apartment?"

"That's different," protested Otto. "I'm a reasoning, thinking human being, and can count numbers and remember names."

"How do you know these birds can't? Here in this big colony, which is a city for them; they must have some method of remembering different nests and trees. I'll bet they have names for these trees and clumps of bushes. Just watch them return to their nests. They flop right down on the right one every time. They don't have to stop and consider. They know their own home either by instinct or by some definite signs."

"Then you credit them with pretty near as much knowledge as we have?" answered Otto.

Weston answered in a noncommittal tone, "I don't know how much they know, or what they think."

Occasionally an alligator or a squirming reptile emerged from the water and invaded the colony of birds' nests. When the first of these robbers appeared the two boys held their breath. Otto finally exclaimed:

"There are the thieves and murderers which this city of birds must look out for. They don't have to wait for man to come here to frighten them."

"Wait a few minutes," Weston replied. "I think the birds are equal to dealing with the enemy."

There was a sharp scream, followed by a wild hubbub. The alligator had rolled over on a couple of nests, crushing the eggs with his clumsy body. The parent birds immediately set up a shriek of anger and defiance, flying toward the alligator with talons and beaks ready for action. Nearly the whole colony of large birds rose from the ground and bushes at the same instant, and joined in the attack. There was a rush of wind caused by the flapping of such an army of wings. The alligator stared up at the horde of screeching birds. He was apparently unaccustomed to this sort of thing. He had many times in the past snapped his jaws on a wading heron or egret, and no protest had been made.

He raised his head now and snapped viciously at one of the angry parents, but his jaws closed on empty air. The birds were on the lookout, and not to be taken unprepared. They flew around him in a dense circle, and tired the alligator out in his desperate effort to bite one of their number. For a few moments this harmless demonstration continued, the alligator holding his own, and refusing to budge from his bed of broken egg shells and twigs.

But the tactics of the birds suddenly changed. One of the swiftest of their number pounced down upon the alligator's back, and delivered a stinging blow so close to the saurian's right eye that he ducked his head quickly. Both eyes were closed in self-defense. When they were opened again a dozen birds seemed to be pecking at the small, snake-like eyes. In vain the alligator dodged and snapped, ducking his head, and thrashing his tail sideways. He could not open his eyes long enough to see his enemies, and they, conscious of their power, kept up the attack at this one weak point until the alligator in desperation rolled over and crawled hastily back to the water.

The birds followed, giving the huge creature no rest until he disappeared with a gurgle under the surface of the lagoon. Then with a scream of triumph the birds rose in the air, and returned to their ordinary day's work.

"Hurrah for the birds!" shouted Otto. "That was a gallant attack and fight!"

Weston joined his cousin in expressing his admiration for the birds. Later in the morning they witnessed a fight between the birds and a huge snake. The reptile fared worse than the alligator, for he had no tough hide to protect him, and he could not wriggle back into the water in time. The birds literally tore him to pieces with their sharp claws and beaks. One of their number had caught him in the act of stealing an egg from a nest, and instantly the alarm had been given. As in the case of the alligator, the whole colony apparently rallied to the rescue of one of their comrades in trouble, and when they discovered that it was a snake instead of a thick-skinned alligator, they pounced upon him. The snake realized his danger, and had apparently taken the terrible risk with a full knowledge of the consequence of discovery. Instead of offering fight, he started for the water, dropping the egg at once. When the first bird drove a sharp beak into his body, the frightened reptile wriggled and tried foolishly to hide in the underbrush. Like others of his kind he plunged his head under the leaves, hoping thus to escape the storm of wrath descending upon him.

The birds easily cut and slashed his body into ribbons, the snake, finally, in desperation, raising his head to strike back; but his tormentors were too many, and the point of attack continued from above instead of on a level with the snake's head. Thus within a few minutes the second enemy of the bird colony was literally torn to pieces and devoured, for some of the birds appeared to swallow strips of the flesh torn from the snake.

"That settles the snake question," ejaculated Otto, "and I guess after that I won't worry about the helplessness of the birds. In numbers there is safety, and they know it."

"Except when man comes along with his shotgun and rifle," murmured Weston.

"Yes," assented Otto a little sadly. "The birds have no show then. One man could finish the whole colony, and either kill or drive them all away. We certainly have a power that we should be careful in using."

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CHAPTER XX.

THE more important question of finding their way back to the Caloosahatchie River concerned the boys after they had thoroughly explored every part of their queer island. The marshy swamp and forest of tall saw-grass and reeds growing in the deep water surrounded the small island on every side, and the lagoons of water opening into each other stretched in unfathomed vistas in all directions. The water was almost stagnant, and heavy with the odors of decaying vegetation. Aquatic life teemed on all sides. The lagoons were nearly choked in places so that the water could scarcely move.

" We must make an effort to get back to the river now," Weston announced late in the forenoon. " We can't stay here forever."

" But it seems like leaving our last hope behind us," Otto replied with a wry face. " There's nothing but water, mud and reeds about us, and we may not be able to find solid ground again for days."

" That's true, but do you want to camp here forever?"

" Oh, no, but I should like to know something about what to expect. I hate this uncertainty."

" So do I. But nothing was ever found without making a diligent hunt for it."

" Your philosophy is all right, cousin, but how about your plans for the hunt? Have you any definite idea where the river is located, or how you're going to reach it?"

" I know which way is north, and which is south—and the river runs almost due east and west."

" And we're on the north or south side of it?"

" I'm not sure which," stammered Weston. " You see, we drifted away from it when we were busy with other things."

" Then what good is your compass? I don't see that you can find the river very well unless you know which side of it we drifted."

Weston packed his few things in his canoe, and then replied:

" I'm going due south until we find the river, or get tangled up in the swamp. Then we'll go north until we strike a current of some kind."

" A sort of 'I'l-find-it-if-it-takes-all-winter' policy," laughed Otto, following his cousin's example in preparing for departure.

When they once more paddled on the sluggish water of the lagoon, they looked back somewhat regretfully at the island where the birds had built their city of homes, and when it faded away in the distance the two boys unconsciously sighed. It had been a pleasant sojourn for them, and they felt like travelers in a desert leaving the last oasis behind.

Their progress was more rapid now than it had been on the river, for the water had no current to offer opposition to their boats, and it was so clear and deep in places that they could push along without interruption.

There was not much change in the view ahead. From one lagoon they seemed to pass into another, with the same forests of tall grass and reeds growing out of the water and fringing the sides of the inland lakes with banks of green; but when they attempted to push through this grass they found no shore. The water was several feet deep even where the grass grew the thickest. Some of the lagoons were larger than others, and a few were a mile or two in length, but otherwise they presented duplicate conditions and environments that gradually grew very tame and monotonous. They had passed beyond the line of trees and swamp vines and thickets. They were in the region of saw-grass and reeds, with neither tree nor land in view to serve as guiding marks. In vain they stood up in their boats to look around, hoping to catch a glimpse of some tall cypress above the heads of the waving grass. But only endless vistas of nodding grass-plumes met their gaze. They were certainly on a strange sea, whose boundaries were limited by aquatic plant life which offered neither hope nor encouragement.

For hours the two explorers paddled on in silence, both affected by the terrible silence and loneliness of the scene. Even the birds had deserted this waste region. Occasionally a flock of buzzards or a troop of herons would fly swiftly across the sky. The harsh screech of a wild animal in the distance would also break the silence once in a great while, and instead of shuddering at this noise Otto welcomed it as a sign that land was somewhere.

They rested after a long time of silent paddling. Their thoughts were easily understood, and neither needed to explain what concerned him the most. Weston looked graver and more serious than his cousin, for he felt the responsibility of the expedition resting upon his own shoulders, and he was plainly worried about their situation. In all the years that he had tramped and paddled through the great swamp, he had never been quite so confused in his bearings, or conscious of such strange surroundings. There had always been some sign of a shore around, and trees and thick underbrush had marked the line of separation between the water and land. There had also been plenty of tropical birds to keep him company. The entire absence of these rather impressed him more than any feature of the landscape. He looked around in vain for the herons, ibises, cranes, and song-birds, and frequently craned his head sideways to catch some distant chatter of the paroquets.

Gradually a new fear seemed to clutch his heart, and he breathed hard and fast. What strange country had they reached? He had heard of the awful solitude of the grass swamps, but nothing like this had ever occurred to him. Here the world seemed deserted by all creatures. Turning to Otto once he said hoarsely:

" Throw your line and hook over, cousin."

" Why, we have fish enough for dinner. I saved some from breakfast."

" Throw it over," almost sternly commanded Weston.

Baiting his hook, Otto flung it over the stern of his canoe, grumbling a little the while. The hook had barely touched bottom before there was a jerk on the line, and Otto hauled in an enormous catfish.

" Whew! He's a whopper!" he shouted enthusiastically.

" All right," said Weston; " if you don't need him, throw him back in the water again."

Otto stared at his cousin and asked: " What's the matter with you, Weston? Did you want me to catch him just for fun?"

" No—but I wanted to see if there were any fish in this water," stammered Weston, in an apologetic voice. " You see, I began to think the place was entirely deserted. But there are fish!"

His eyes brightened, and he even essayed to smile. Otto for a moment was silent, and then he added in an awed voice:

" Oh, I see! You're getting frightened at our position, and you thought—thought we'd reached a place where nothing could live."

" Don't put it that way, cousin," Weston laughed. " I was for a moment a little worried—and frightened. It did seem so lonely and desolate here. But—but—"

" But there are fishes, and, therefore, we're safe," interrupted Otto slowly and quietly.

After that they remained silent again for a few moments, eagerly studying the mouth of each successive lagoon, hoping that it would reveal a change in the scenery. With painful expectancy they turned from one disappointment to another. The grassy swamp was unchanged; the lagoons and bayous were silent and voiceless; and the stretches of turbid water mere duplicates of each other. Even the alligators no longer swam up to their canoes and poked inquiring noses out of the water, nor floated like inanimate logs on the surface to bask in the warm sun.

With no shade overhead, the noonday sun grew uncomfortably warm and glaring. There were no trees or thickets to shield the boys from the direct rays of the sun, and they pushed their canoes finally in among the tallest of the clumps of saw-grass to secure relief. By bending the tops of the grass stalks over and tying them in a knot overhead, they succeeded in making a rude sort of protecting shade. Here they rested while they ate their noonday meal.

"It seems to me," Otto reflected, "that we've jumped from the frying-pan into the fire. I wish we were back on that island with the birds."

"Still we couldn't stay there forever," replied Weston convincingly.

"No, that's true. Then I'll make another wish. I wish we were back on the river, or better still, at home."

They munched away at some cold cooked fish, birds' eggs, and dry crackers, which they had saved from their breakfast. Otto, looking at the last of these, suddenly exclaimed:

"Good gracious! How are we going to cook our food after this if we can find no land? We can't make a fire in the canoes, and I'm sure I can't live on raw fish for many days."

"I've been thinking of that," Weston answered, "and it's worried me a great deal."

"I should think it might!" ejaculated Otto in consternation. "Why, we're worse off than shipwrecked sailors."

"No, not as bad as that. We can see shore, or something that looks like land."

"But it is all deceptive—worse than a desert mirage."

"I'll grant that, but still it's better than no signs of shore. Besides we can touch bottom here in the grass."

"Yes," assented Otto gravely, "we can even wade, I suppose, round among this grass. It's only four or five feet deep. But lots of good that will do us."

"Still," added Weston musingly, "I'm not sure that it will prove so bad after all. We might be able to rig up something to cook our meals on."

"How? Necessity is the mother of invention, I know, but it doesn't always strike me at the right time. If you have a plan, explain it."

"Why, it isn't much of a plan, but, if we should bend enough of these thick grass and reed stalks together, we could make a foundation strong enough to hold our frying-pan. Then, what's to prevent us from building a fire on top of grass tops?"

"Wouldn't the grass support burn down?" asked Otto incredulously.

"I mean build the fire in the pan, and hold our fish over the hot coals," Weston explained.

"Well—yes—possibly that would do," Otto added hesitatingly.

"We'll try it to-night. You must catch a fresh fish, and we'll enjoy a good supper."

"And then sleep in our canoes while we float away on this unknown sea."

"No, we won't float away, for there's no tide, and besides we'll tie our boats to the grass stalks."

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CHAPTER XXI.

THAT night they put into execution the plans they had thus mapped out earlier in the day. Weston was of a nature always anxious to anticipate the future, and when he foresaw possible dangers and emergencies he planned for them. Their unexpected experience in the dismal grass-swamp had stimulated him to thought and action. The conditions that surrounded them required a readjustment of plans, and all that afternoon he was busy planning for

he was trying to deceive us."
possible contingencies. If they should prove so lucky as to find the river again, all would be well; but meanwhile they had to face new dangers and unpleasant surroundings, not to speak of possible catastrophies of a harrying nature.

Toward sundown Otto threw his line in the water and quickly hauled out fish enough to last them for several meals. Immediately Weston said: "We'll keep all of them, and if our plan succeeds, we'll cook enough for breakfast and dinner. We may not be able to cook this way often."

"All right," responded the fisherman of the party. "You prepare your fire, and I'll clean the fish."

The cleaning process was quickly finished, and Otto turned all of his attention to Weston's work. Pulling several of the strongest grass stalks together, he tied these in a secure bunch near the surface of the water, and then bent their tops down. Drawing others down to meet these, he bound them together so firmly that their united stalks formed a pretty solid foundation or platform just above the water. When Otto saw the improvised stand finished, he clapped his hands.

"Eureka, cousin! You're a genius! No reason to worry when you're around. I know you'll get the expedition home again!"

Weston smiled, but made no answer. He picked up their frying-pan and placed it on top of the platform of grass stalks. It stood there firmly and solidly. Then he cut off dry leaves and stalks of the dead reeds and grasses. These he piled high in the frying-pan, and told Otto to gather more in his canoe for use when they burnt out. When the match was applied the dried fuel burnt brightly, and with a little care the surrounding stalks that formed the platform were kept from catching. Occasionally they dipped the bottom of the frying-pan in the water to cool it over.

With the fish split and impaled on a stick they had used for this purpose before, it soon began to sizzle and emit strangely appetizing odors. Never before had such an impromptu campfire been made in that portion of the globe. The trailing smoke from it must have startled any bird accustomed to the lonely solitude of the place. Even the boys looked up at the result of their ingenuity and smiled a little exultantly. They had built a campfire on the very surface of the water, and their dinner was cooking as quickly and satisfactorily as though they were sprawling on the ground in some favored corner of the swamp, with all the accessories for camping and cooking ready at hand.

"That fish will taste the best yet," Otto remarked, smacking his lips.

"Yes, things obtained under great difficulties always taste the sweetest," was Weston's prompt answer, as he turned the browning morsel of half-cooked fish.

"If it wasn't for the dismal outlook, I'd enjoy this little experience immensely," Otto added, looking reflectively from the frying-pan to the stretches of water and grass. "It's certainly romantic enough, but the thought of being lost indefinitely in this morass makes me shudder a little."

"Nearly as much as being bitten by a rattlesnake?"

"Not quite," Otto replied with a laugh. "I think that was about the limit of terrorizing experiences. I don't know of anything that ever quite made my hair stand on end before. Didn't it turn gray, cousin?"

"I hadn't noticed it, but you did look pretty sick and frightened."

"I was," confessed Otto with vehement conviction. "I was never so frightened before in all my life, and I hope I never shall be again."

"And to think after all the danger was largely imaginary."

"If anybody except Osprey Feather told me that, I wouldn't believe him," replied Otto slowly. "But somehow I can't think

"No, he was honest and truthful. I don't think he could lie if he wanted to; it wouldn't become him."

They were silent a few minutes while their whole attention was devoted to the proper cooking of their fish. Weston with dexterous movements turned and browned the fish until it was a mass of crispy food, tempting to the eyes and palate. When the first one was thoroughly cooked, they devoured it eagerly, postponing the cooking of the rest until their appetites were satisfied.

"Fortunate we have plenty of good drinking water," Weston remarked, as he washed down some of the fish and dried crackers with a little water.

Otto ate his fish without comment, drinking freely meanwhile. Gradually as his appetite was appeased his spirits rose, and the outlook appeared less dismal and more propitious. Weston likewise took a rosier view of their surroundings, and finally said:

"We were pretty low down in the dumps when that snake bit you. I didn't see any way out of our trouble. I thought nearly everybody and everything had deserted us. It appeared as if fortune was against us. I can't imagine any gloomier view of life than I experienced then."

"Neither can I," responded Otto, looking at his cousin.

"Well, then," Weston resumed, "if we got out of that difficulty all right I'm inclined to think we shouldn't be so discouraged now. It may be that we'll find the river yet, and then we'll laugh at this adventure as we can now afford to laugh at your snake wound."

"I was thinking about the same thing," Otto replied. "We have no business to give up like this and imagine we're lost for good—certainly not so long as we have dry boats under us and plenty of fish to cook."

"Then suppose we cheer up, and just imagine we're off on a lark, camping in our boats, and able to return home whenever we get tired of the fun."

"That's the best view to take of the situation, cousin, and I'm going to stop worrying. We'll get out of it somehow."

"Yes, we'll find a way out. I feel that we shall."

They looked at each other and smiled; but their declaration of faith certainly helped them. They found it easier to face the perplexing problems ahead, and instead of dreading the approach of night they hailed it with a certain degree of anticipation.

"Now that we've had a warm supper, and have breakfast prepared, we must look out for a soft bed," Weston announced. "How are we going to make it?"

"I can imagine that you will invent some sort of a bed by lashing the two canoes together to form a catamaran that can't tip over if we get to rolling sideways in our sleep."

"Exactly, Otto! I'm going to lash the boats together, and then make such a bed that you will always remember. Talk about your hair mattresses and spring beds! I think you'll find the one we sleep on tonight superior to either."

"It will be a bed of rushes, I suppose?"

"Yes, rushes and grass. We may as well gather the material for it now. We must cut off only the top leaves of the grass, for we don't want a wet bed."

"And if it should rain in the night?"

"Haven't we our canvas tent-covering? What's the matter, cousin? You seem to forget that we're well supplied with all the necessities and comforts of a traveling home."

Otto laughed, and proceeded to cut off the dry grass leaves and stalks. It was not a difficult matter to secure enough to form a most luxuriant bed. They spread these out in the middle of the boats.

"Now hand me the paddles," Weston said. "We'll lash the boats together, head and stern, and you couldn't tip them over if you tried. We could float on the top of waves as big as you ever saw in the ocean."

It was not a difficult task to lash the paddles across the stern and bow of the canoes, and when Weston had finished the job the impromptu catamaran was as rigid as any craft that ever floated on the high seas. With their beds of grass in the bottom of the canoes, the two boys had a luxurious lounging place, and they half reclined on them early in the evening while the moon rose high in the sky. All about they heard the splash of fish and the buzzing of flies. With their tent canvas finally erected over the top of the two boats, and the mosquito netting hung down the sides, they were protected from all inquisitive insects.

"I think now I'm beginning to enjoy it all," Otto said gleefully.

"No bears or wild-cats to bother you tonight," Weston joked.

"No, nor snakes either—not unless the great sea-serpent should unexpectedly appear."

"I think I'll sleep without dreaming of sea-serpents," replied Weston drowsily.

"If anything disturbs me before morning, I know I shall think of sea-serpents first," replied Otto. "So now if you hear me yell in my dream you'll know what to expect."

"Well, good-night! I'll remember, but I'm terribly sleepy, and I'm going to enjoy pleasant dreams."

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CHAPTER XXII.

WITH the canoes lashed together and anchored to the tall saw-grass, the two young adventurers slept profoundly and peacefully. Scarcely a ripple of the water disturbed the smooth surface of the sluggish lagoon, and the wind that whispered among the nodding heads of reeds and grass was soft and low. The usual harsh, discordant cries of the swamp birds and animals did not lull them to sleep, and upon awakening the first thing in the morning Weston noticed the absence of the noises. For a few moments he remained in his bed thinking and listening.

"We're further from the shore than I thought," he mused, "for there isn't any sound of birds and animals out here."

The only possible sound of animate life that reached his ears was the occasional distant croak of an alligator or frog, or the flapping of heron wings as a few of these silent fliers drifted across the sea of grass and water.

Otto rose from his slumbers refreshed and happy. The night's rest had made him eager for the day's work. After stripping he plunged over the side of his canoe to take a dip in the water. Weston having assured him that there was little danger from alligators, he swam round the boats, and made several ineffectual efforts to dive to the bottom.

"They have the longest stalks I ever saw," he gasped, referring to the tall saw-grass. "I'm going to touch bottom before I come out."

Again he made the attempt, and this time he came up triumphantly with a root of one of the stalks. It was a muddy bottom, and Otto shook the lump of dark soil from the roots before dragging them toward the canoe.

"It's pretty muddy," Weston said. "No sandy bottom here."

"Muddy! I stood knee deep in mud to pull this up," Otto assured him. "It's cold and unpleasant down there, too. The bottom is covered with decaying roots and grass stalks. They felt like snakes and eels clinging to the legs. Ugh! I don't want to try it again."

"Guess you'd better not, for here comes a visitor. He wants to see what all the disturbance is about."

Weston pointed toward a slight ripple in the water. Otto looked and shuddered, for he had learned the meaning of those widening ripples that usually started from some little floating black object.

"I guess he's hungry," he said. "Well, I'm not your breakfast this morning."

Picking up a stout piece of stalk he flung it toward the approaching object. There was a sudden vicious snap, and then the alligator turned and as slowly and silently disappeared in the grass.

"I think 'gators are about the ugliest things that swim the water," Otto commented as he hurriedly dressed himself. "If it wasn't downright cruelty to animals to wound them, I'd take a good deal of pleasure in peppering every one I meet with duck shot. I suppose they have feeling as well as other animals, and we can't do more than wound them."

"You can't do that unless you happen to hit one in the eye," replied Weston with a laugh. "Your bird shot would rattle on that fellow's back like peas on a tin can."

"He's an old patriarch!" Otto exclaimed. "See the size of him!"

"Yes, Mr. Murphy would like to bag him and carry him back alive. I wish he was here."

"So do I," replied Otto, with a comical grin, "not altogether because of that 'gator, but because I'd feel easier in mind if he was here."

"Oh, we decided last night not to worry even if we are lost; so don't begin to break your resolution so early in the morning."

"I'm not worrying. I'm simply saying that Mr. Murphy's presence just now would be a pleasure."

"Because he could show you how to get out of our present predicament?" queried Weston.

"That might be one of the pleasant results of his company," was Otto's noncommittal reply.

"I've been thinking," Weston began abruptly, turning the subject, "that if we paddled due east, following the direction of the sun, we might get out of this forest of grass, and find the swamp again. I'm going to make an effort this morning to find trees where we can make some observations. If I could get a few feet above the tops of this grass, I think I could get our bearings, and probably find the river again."

"Yes, but how are we to find the trees?" skeptically asked his cousin. "I don't see much hope for that. It's grass, grass, grass, everywhere, and when it isn't grass it's water."

"But there is an end to everything, and there must be an end to this."

"I agree with you, but where is the end?"

"Follow me, and you'll probably find it before night."

Within a very short time, they were ready to renew their journey. This time they took the sun as their guide, and following its direction they paddled due east. Their course was a little crooked, for they had to wind in and out among the grassy islands, passing from one lagoon to another.

For two hours they paddled steadily without meeting with any apparent change or improvement. The grass appeared to grow in endless variety as far as they could see. The vistas opened up between the dense islands of waving plumes presented nothing new to the view. Beyond them was more grass—and more grass—with sluggish streams of water flowing between. The views were discouraging, and, when one disappointment followed another so many times that the keen edge wore off, the boys paddled listlessly and with less determination. It seemed like a labor that never ended. There was no reward at the conclusion of a day's work, and the labor became like that of a treadmill.

"I don't see that we gain much by going ahead," Otto murmured finally. "I think the world must be half covered with sawgrass and water."

"I'm going to paddle a little longer," Weston replied, "for it's getting thinner ahead, and the lagoons are broader and deeper."

"I hadn't noticed much change."

"No, but there is. Look at that ahead. Isn't that thinner than the grassy islands we've been passing? You can almost see the lagoon through the stalks."

"Maybe you're right," grudgingly admitted Otto. "Anyway, we can't do more than keep at it. I'm good for two or three more hours of paddling before dinner."

"Then let us put in good work and earn our dinner."

They made their small boats glide swiftly and smoothly through the water, plying the paddle with renewed energy. They were encouraged in their efforts by the unmistakable change in their surroundings which increased as they progressed. The lagoons broadened out into bays, the streams of sluggish water into rivers, the grassy islands grew thinner and more straggling, while the water deepened and took on a different hue. It was clearer and more limpid, rippling and flowing in places as if stirred by tide or wind, and so tempting to look at that Weston finally dipped his hands in it to taste of it.

"It is cool and refreshing," he said. "It is really excellent drinking water."

"Then we must be leaving the swamp and marsh. I thought once or twice I saw sandy bottom."

Weston shook his head at this, and rested on his paddles while he surveyed the scene around. "We're certainly getting out of the saw-grass," he said.

"But we may be jumping from the frying-pan into the fire," suggested Otto, at a loss for any better illustration to express his doubts.

"That may be so, for I'm at a loss to explain the sudden change."

"It seems to me," reflected Otto, gazing steadily ahead, "that I can see open water through the grass ahead which doesn't have any limit to it. I wonder now if we're discovering some unknown sea."

Weston turned around suddenly and stared in the same direction. He even half stood in his frail canoe to get a better glimpse of the view. Otto noticing his sudden interest turned his eyes from the view to his cousin. Both were silent for some time.

"Well?" queried Otto finally. "Have you found anything remarkable, cousin? You look grave enough, I'm sure. Kindly blurt it out, and let me know what to expect."

Weston did not reply immediately. His mind was feverishly active, and his thoughts full of doubts and fears. When he sighed heavily and sat down again, Otto exclaimed:

"Can't you speak your thoughts? What have you discovered? Is that the river ahead?"

"I wish it were," Weston answered slowly. "Yes, I wish it were. But I'm afraid it is not."

"What is it then?" impatiently.

"It—" the boy began, and then hesitated. "Yes, Otto, I'm afraid we're lost on Lake Okeechobee. That's the lake ahead."

"Okeechobee! Whew! I've read enough about the lake to make me anxious to see it. I never thought I'd go canoeing on it."

"And I'm afraid before you're through you'll wish you never had," replied Weston.

"Why? Is there any danger—any more than we found in this swamp?"

Weston shook his head in silence. When worried by doubts he was always quiet and thoughtful. He was not sure now whether it was his duty to express all he feared. He had always attempted to treat Otto with some of the consideration shown by an elder brother to a younger and less experienced one. This had several times annoyed Otto so that he protested a little irritably. He now blurted out with some impatience:

"I wish you'd speak out, cousin, and not treat me as if I were a kid. If there's any danger I want to know it. If there isn't don't be so secretive and silent, for you make me think there is something back of all your actions that you're trying to hide from me."

"Well," stammered Weston slowly, in a vain attempt to smile, "I'm afraid there is danger, Otto—a good deal of danger. Okeechobee is so big and far from all civilization that it will be hard to find our way back, and besides you know it is a shoreless, inland sea. It is surrounded on every side by grassy islands, which are covered with several feet of water, and we may have to paddle for miles through the grass before we can find any solid ground."

"It seems to me," replied Otto, slowly, "that we've been doing that for two days past now."

"Yes, and we may do it for two weeks longer."

"Weston's voice expressed the gloom he felt, and Otto was quick to note it. They rowed silently through the lagoon until they emerged from the surrounding fringe of grass, and then for the first time saw in plain view the wide expanse of Lake Okeechobee.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AT FIRST there was some relief to the mind. The vision was not limited by monotonous banks of waving grass plumes, and the sun shining upon the lake converted it into a picture of burnished gold. In one direction the waters of the lake extended as far as the eyes could see, disappearing gradually in the distance to meet the few fleecy clouds that marred the otherwise clear sky. Back of the boys the tall grass extended, and on the right and left the green line of vegetation dwindled and faded from view in the rim of the lake.

A gentle breeze was stirring across the water, and small ripples flashed in the sunshine. The boys shaded their eyes with their hands and surveyed their surroundings intently. There was nothing animate in sight. It was a desolate, lonely scene. The calm, rippling waters dashing lightly against the sides of their canoes seemed to intensify the quietness by their soft, purring noise.

While they looked a stray hawk or osprey flew across the blue sky and disappeared quickly beyond the range of green vegetation as if fearful of getting lost in the lonely region. A few aquatic plants, with enormous leaves, spread out on the surface of the lake near the grass border, and from these hopped and jumped fresh water skimmers and flies. Occasionally a fish would splash from the water in a flying leap after one of the flies.

There were fish in the lake—plenty of them, as the boys soon discovered—and the water was cool and fresh, satisfying to the tongue and parched lips. They drank eagerly of it, and splashed it over their hands and face. Otto first broke the silence by saying:

"I'm not sure but this is better than the saw-grass swamp. Here we have a view, and we can see something besides grass."

"Yes, but we must return to the grass to find our way back," Weston replied. "This lake is surrounded on every side by the grass swamps, and we must pass through them to reach the Caloosahatchie."

"Isn't there any other outlet to the lake?"

"No; the other rivers all flow into the lake."

There was nothing alarming in the appearance of the inland sea, and the boys for a few hours enjoyed the change in their environments; but Weston knew only too well how the terrible loneliness would in time pall upon their minds. He had heard hunters describe their experiences on the lake when lost. He tried to remember now some of the things they told him. The mouth of the Caloosahatchie was very deceptive. The lake opened into it by a series of wide and narrow lagoons. These were no different in appearance from hundreds of others, and one might hunt round among them for days and weeks before striking the right one. Even when the river was reached there was danger of being lost again, for it spread out in places into wide lakes filled with grassy islands, some of which completely obscured the main channel, and deceptively led one to take the wrong direction.

There was not a solitary landmark in view—not a tree, shrub or island. It was all water and saw-grass, and back of these were more grass islands and stretches of water.

"Well, we must make the most of it," sighed Weston, as though he had been struggling with himself to reach some satisfactory conclusion.

"That's what we decided before," replied Otto, with a smile. "We're not to say 'quits' until the end."

"Then we must paddle up and down the lake until we can find the mouth of the river."

After an hour's work the hopelessness of their task dawned upon them. The edge of the lake appeared unchanged. Go as far or whither they would, the waving grass plumes, with streams and lagoons of water opening between them, baffled all attempts to find a clear trail to lead them back to the river. The rippling waves lapped against the forest of grass stalks, or the whispering wind stirred them until their plumes nodded like billows on the ocean. Tiny insects swept around in dense clouds, and hummed and droned away in endless monotony.

The search for the mouth of the river was continued all that day, and at night time the boys withdrew under the protecting side of the grass to pitch their camp as on the preceding night. They had moved several miles farther north during the day, and they were tired with their labors. With their guns they had managed to shoot a few solitary birds which flew occasionally out of the watery waste of swamp grass, and these were added to their meager diet of fish and crackers.

The second night on their bed of grass leaves and stalks failed to yield as much pleasure as the first. The novelty of their floating camp had worn off, and the old feeling of depression was settling over them. The night was clear and star-lit, and with the moon coming up early the boys remained seated in their canoes, watching and listening, until nearly midnight.

They were very sober and thoughtful, Weston more so than his cousin. The intense quietness of the evening finally made them restless and depressed. They stirred uneasily in their boats. The stars and moon, shining down upon the great, silent, shoreless inland sea, lost all attraction, and they both looked for other objects to divert their mind. Failing in this they finally resorted to conversation.

"I wonder where Osprey Feather is?" said Otto, revealing the line of his thoughts by his words. "If he should turn up now, we would welcome him as much as we did when that snake bit me."

"Queer, isn't it?" replied Weston. "I was thinking of the Seminole, too. Yes, he could probably show us how to reach the river. The Indians are about the only inhabitants of these swamps who know Okeechobee. I wish Osprey Feather would turn up."

"I suppose he's hunting that white man who tried to kill him," added Otto.

"Then I hope the fellow will get lost out here, for Osprey Feather would follow him. A Seminole on the trail never knows defeat. He'll move heaven and earth to reach his victim."

"Do the Seminoles ever hunt on this lake, or come here for anything?" asked Otto suddenly.

"Yes, they come here at times, but not often. I've been hoping that we would find one here, or at least stumble upon one of their camps. I've heard plume-hunters tell about their camps in the swamp, made of stakes driven in the mud, with rude platforms built on top. They stand in several feet of water sometimes, and even some of their villages are built in this way. You actually have to paddle out to them. No man could reach them any other way. They make pretty good hiding spots, for no one would ever think of looking for them in such wet places. Up on the Kissimmee there are several villages built by the Indians, which in dry seasons stand on the mud and sand, but in wet seasons two or three feet of water are under their houses. They rest on stilts so that the river never quite gets up to their door-sills."

"If only we had the wood we might build a platform, and get out and stretch our limbs for a change," added Otto. "I'm terribly cramped in this boat, and I'd like a walk or run above all else."

"I'm afraid our only chance to stretch ourselves out of the boat is to take a swim in the lake."

"I don't like the looks of it by moonlight," Otto responded, shuddering a little at the silvery, rippling water.

"It does look cold and uninviting, but in the morning I'm going to take a swim."

A silence fell between them for awhile, and their thoughts drifted to other scenes and places. Then once more Otto asked:

"Do they ever have storms on the lake? I should think it might get pretty rough here if the wind blew hard."

Weston replied truthfully. "Yes, they have violent winds here at times, and the lake gets very rough. I've heard hunters tell of how the waves tear up the saw-grass by the roots and pile it up in great heaps along the edge of the lake."

"Then we wouldn't have much show if a storm should sweep down upon us," feebly stammered Otto, looking at the sky with a critical eye.

"We would have to hurry back to the shelter of the grassy islands," was the quiet reply. "This lake would be no place for us then."

"The sky is a little overcast," Otto remarked. "Do you think there's any danger of a storm to-night?"

Weston laughed, and answered emphatically, "No, the wind is from the north, and that is not a stormy direction. Don't get frightened because I said the storms were sometimes violent here."

"I'm not afraid, cousin," stiffly replied Otto. "But I think it wise to be prepared for the future."

Before they finally dropped off asleep, the moon had disappeared behind a cloud, and the sky was nearly obscured from view by fleecy vapor. Weston sleepily took it for a night fog rising from the lake, and when he dropped off into sound slumber he had no thought of storms. Otto, not wishing to show any fear, tried to forget any troublesome imaginings and finally banished all thoughts of impending disaster from his mind.

But the truth was an approaching storm was apparent in the sky and wind. There had been a change in the temperature, and the night dew fell heavier than usual. A gentle wind at first rippled across the sea of nodding plumes, and then moaned somewhat dismally as it got lost in the tangled forests of stalks. As it increased in velocity it drove the waves into larger swells, and they swished and lapped against the obstructing grass in vicious monotony.

The boys tired with their days work slept peacefully and calmly on, unconscious of any danger. Their canoes fastened together by the paddles in the shape of a catamaran offered more resistance to the swells than if they had been separated. They rocked very little at first, and the waves were of considerable size before their effect was very noticeable. They were tied to a bunch of grass stalks which kept them from drifting. At first the boats tugged at their anchorage, but were unable to break loose.

With the rising of the wind, the swing and jerk of the boats grew more pronounced. Gradually one root after another was jerked from its mooring in the soft mud, and the boats drifted away before the wind and waves. Still the boys slept, dreaming pleasantly of other times and scenes. The moon soon lost all power to shine through the dense banks of clouds, and intense darkness settled over the lake. The dim lines of grass became blurred and lost all form and shape. It was impossible to distinguish the line of the water from the forests of growing grass, and the scene was one vast background of darkness.

White caps appeared on the lake in the distance, showing their white teeth in flashes in spite of the blackness of the night. These drew nearer, lashed and driven onward by the wind. When they reached the canoes they splashed a shower of spray over their tops. Some of this falling on the sleepers awakened them.

The boys sat upright and stared around them. It required some moments for either to gather his thoughts together. It was so dark that the mind could not immediately grasp the situation. The sense of fear seized both of them; but it required a vivid flash of lightning to make things plain.

In that flash they saw the lake, the line of grass, and the black clouds in the sky. They saw also that they had drifted away from their anchorage, and that the boats were tossing wildly on the waves. Weston shouted quickly:

"Otto, quick! Are you awake?"

"Yes, what has happened? Is it a storm?"

"We must unlash the boats and get back from the lake!" Weston shouted back.

But this work was not easy to accomplish. The boats were tossed round so unmercifully that any attempt to unfasten the paddles threatened to precipitate the occupants in the water. Suddenly Weston said:

"No, don't unfasten them. I think we're safer this way. We'll be capsized in a minute if we separate. Besides we'd soon get lost from each other in this darkness."

"That would be worse than anything," replied Otto with a shudder.

"The wind is drifting us inland, and we may soon get beyond the range of the waves."

"Can't we do something to help us?"

"Not unless we find more paddles."

There was little they could do except to try to hold the canoes upright before the waves, but with bow on to the swells they were often flung about so viciously that it seemed as if they must go over. But their salvation was in their peculiar catamaran rig. The frail canoes would have toppled over easily had they been separated; but whether facing the waves or receiving them sideways they offered enough steadiness to remain upright.

The waves and wind were sweeping across the lake, and the boats were thus naturally forced toward the distant swamp. Soon they could see by aid of the vivid flashes of lightning that they were clear of the lake and were once more drifting in the series of lagoons which surrounded the lake. Saw-grass was on all sides. This broke the force of the waves, and gradually the violence of the swells decreased. The storm itself developed, and its roar became intense.

The rain fell in drenching showers, soaking through the light canvas protection they had stretched over their heads, and the wind catching under this soon blew it outward like a flag. Weston caught it and folded it up just as it was being blown away.

A good deal of water had been shipped in the canoes, and the rain falling in torrents added rapidly to this. The danger of being swamped threatened them. They had to bail out the water steadily and quickly to keep from sinking, and as they realized how little stood between them and death by drowning they clinched their teeth and worked bravely and steadily.

It was a wild and awful night for the two castaways. The storm lasted several hours, and then passed away as suddenly as it had appeared; but to the boys it seemed as if they could never again become reconciled to their position. When the rain stopped and the stars appeared overhead, they experienced little joy. They were so wet and wretchedly uncomfortable that they could do little more than drop back exhausted in their canoes and wonder what would become of them. Even the thoughts of morning brought little comfort to their minds.

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CHAPTER XXIV.

THE return of daylight revived their spirits somewhat, and showed them their positions. Their boats had been driven back among the saw-grass so that the lake was nowhere in sight. At first they supposed that a narrow screen of grass separated them from it, and that they could return to it in a few minutes; but when they attempted to row out of the tangled masses of grass they discovered their mistake. The storm had drifted their boats so far that they were once more lost among the forests of grass and reeds. The series of narrow streams and lagoons that flowed between the submerged grassy islands only served to bewilder them. The vista ahead always promised an escape from their queer prison, but the view dissolved finally into a blotchy line of grass that hemmed them in on every side.

"I'm not sure but we should be thankful for the grass," Weston mused, "for without it that storm would have sent us to the bottom. The waves on the lake were furious and growing larger every minute. The grass broke their force and saved us."

"But we're back again to our old position," moaned Otto. "There's nothing but grass, grass, grass."

"You forget the water," added Weston, making a wry face at the muddy stream through which they were floating.

The storm had disturbed the bottom of the lagoons so that the water was thick with muddy deposits, and its appearance resembled thin molasses. It was unfit to drink, and the boys looked a little apprehensively at their supply of drinking water.

"I don't get caught twice without a supply of water," said Weston. "I filled everything with lake water last night."

"I suppose this rain water in the bottom of the boat is good to drink also," responded Otto.

"If you had nothing else to drink you'd think so," was the answer. "Rain water, even dirty rain water, is a godsend sometimes."

"Shall we keep it then?"

"No, we can't. It will get too stale and dirty in the boat, and we haven't anything empty to put it in."

"I suppose then you expect to find the lake again before our supply of fresh water gives out?"

"I hope so, or what is better yet, the Caloosahatchie River."

Otto did not show much enthusiasm over this vague promise. They had been making a still hunt for the river for several days past, and they appeared no nearer to it than ever.

"We may be close to it," Weston continued, "and all depends upon which direction we move. I'm going to test the current with this feather, and then follow in that direction."

One of the soft, downy feathers of the birds they had shot the previous night for their supper was cast into the water. At first it remained perfectly still, and then catching a puff of wind it drifted rapidly to the right.

"It's the wind, and not the current," Otto said in disappointment.

"The wind is nearly still, but we'll try it again."

Another feather was cast overboard, and as the wind died to a gentle zephyr there seemed to be a distinct drift to the left. Another puff of wind followed, and completely neutralized the effect of the current. But when the feathers slowly began to retreat the boys were confident that there was a very slight current to the left.

"We'll paddle in that direction," announced Weston, "and then try the feathers again."

They followed the lagoon toward its left entrance, and, having passed through a narrow stream that connected it with another, they stopped to repeat the feather test. Once more under the shelter of the sawgrass, they discovered that the feathers showed a slight tendency to drift to the left.

"This is surely the way to the river," Weston said exultantly. "There is a current setting this way. Now for the next lagoon."

They repeated their operation, and passed from one to another, the drift of the waters continuing in one direction. Their courage was slowly returning, and they followed in the direction indicated by the feathers until suddenly they entered a veritable cul-de-sac.

The last lagoon showed a stronger tide or current than any, but it led to nowhere. On the left side there was no opening. The grass grew thick and tall, making it difficult work to push a way through it. The boys paddled up and down to discover some possible outlet; but the same wall of waving plumes presented itself to them.

Otto groaned aloud: "It's no good, cousin. Every trail leads to nothing."

"I don't understand it," moodily responded Weston. "This current certainly flowed this way, and now it stops, and here's no stream ahead."

"I guess we've reached some enchanted part of the world," said Otto trying to appear cheerful, "where water runs uphill, and people stand on their heads instead of on their feet. We're a couple of Alices in Wonderland."

"I'd like to be able to do some of the magic, then, just now," replied Weston. "I'd make this wilderness of grass and water turn into a garden."

"Or an orange grove—with your father's house in the middle."

Weston laughed, but there was an eager look in his face which spoke volumes. The terrible loneliness of the swamp was wearing upon his mind. Otto, looking at him, thought he was thinner in the face and looked careworn. The knowledge that his cousin was abandoning hope made him shiver.

"Shall we have dinner?" Otto asked suddenly, wishing to forget the thoughts that were filling his mind. "This is a nice quiet place to spread our sumptuous table."

"Yes, if you're hungry—eat," wearily answered Weston.

Otto made a grimace, and added:

"You're not cheerful company, cousin. You look glum. Doesn't my cooking agree with you? If not, I'll change about, and let you take charge of the commissary department of this expedition while I do the directing. Come to think of it, I've had the hardest job all along. I'll go on strike now for less work and shorter hours. Here, try your hand with the line."

Otto rose from his place in the canoe and handed the fishing pole to his cousin.

"I think I am getting blue," Weston replied, catching the pole, "and maybe a change of occupation will do me good."

"Fishing is a great soother of the nerves," added Otto. "It's saved many a man from evil thoughts, and made philosophy when you'd least expect it. Even I sometimes feel—"

Weston laughed.

"Don't preach or philosophize," he interrupted. "I'll fish all right, but don't make me a victim of your tongue."

"Then I'll assume command of this expedition," returned Otto, with mock seriousness. "I shall hold you responsible for keeping food always on hand, and I'll—"

"Find the Caloosahatchie!"

"Yes, I'll find a way out of this Chinese puzzle of grass. I'm good at solving puzzles.

Weston grew absorbed in his fishing,

while Otto made ready the grass support for their camp-fire. Busily engaged in this occupation they temporarily forgot the source of their worry. Yet each knew in his own mind that it could not be kept up indefinitely. Their field for work or entertainment was too limited to keep their minds busy for long.

In time they would have to return to the problem facing them, with all of its perplexing intricacies and threatening danger. It was difficult to forget the specter which seemed persistently staring them in the face. With shuddering fear they thought of the possible lonely days ahead—the days that might drag into weeks, and even into months. Death, if not by starvation or thirst, might appear in a more terrible form. Could one remain lost forever in that terrible region without losing the mind? Travelers lost on deserts of sand were not so wretchedly situated as they. With no land within sight; no place other than their small boats to put a foot down; no human being to see or talk to, and scarcely a bird or animal to relieve the monotony of the awful watery waste; with nothing but the limitless horizon of grassy islands—islands, too, whose foundations were several feet under water—and the sluggish lagoons and streams to gaze upon, they were, indeed, in a position to make one shudder with apprehension.

Yet for days they sought bravely and heroically to divert their minds from their danger. With strained efforts they talked and tried to make light of the situation. When Otto's spirits wavered, and his tongue lapsed into silence, Weston, with a new fear in his vibrant voice, would seek to entertain him. They talked over past scenes, recalled adventures and experiences of other days, and told tales which they had read or heard. Otto was a great reader, and his mind was stored with some of the best stories of classic fiction, and in rehearsing these he found relief from the terror that threatened to settle over his mind.

Weston listened in silent appreciation, forcing himself at times, it is true, to wax enthusiastic over the words of his cousin. When night settled over the great watery desert, their minds were particularly heavy and depressed. During the hours of the busy day, there was the steady muscular effort of paddling to keep their minds fresh and healthy, for they made it a business to keep moving.

"Nothing is gained by lying idle," Weston had said, and Otto concurred. "We must keep paddling along with the hope that we may strike the right stream at last."

But when night made progress impossible, they rested in their boats, and looking up at the great vault of heaven their minds would shrink before the terrible ordeal ahead. They grew to dread the hours of darkness. Sleep came only as the result of physical weariness, and they resolved to work hard each day until their bodies were ready for rest and refreshment.

Otto's game of chance did not long hold them. They soon found that by following the blind direction of a blade of grass tossed into the air, they were as likely to paddle round in a circle as anything else. One day Weston said:

"We must select one course and stick to it. It may lead us somewhere."

So after that, taking their direction from the sun, they paddled steadily and persistently northward, Weston still positive that the Caloosahatchie was on that side of them. But when they had kept this up for three days he was ready to be convinced that he might possibly be wrong. Still they paddled onward, moving in the direction they had selected, passing from one lagoon to another, and meeting with few adventures that were worth recording. The constant sameness of the landscape robbed them of all interest in the views ahead, which always faded away into duplicates of those which they had left behind.

CHAPTER XXV.

A week after they had their experience with the storm on Lake Okeechobee, they were reduced to the verge of despair. Worn out with anxiety and deferred hope, they paddled along listlessly, scarcely expecting to find any change in their surroundings. Their nights were spent for the most part in feverish, restless dreams of forests of saw-grass floating on seas of sluggish water. The terrible desolation of the scene had increased, and they scarcely expected any relief from it. The clear sky in the daytime was bright and warm, but at night the stars came out cold and repellant. They would often lie awake half the night, vainly striving to banish the thoughts and dreams that came to torment them.

They grew silent and morose. Neither one had the heart to make the effort to cheer the other. The old farces had worn out their influences. Often they would paddle along for half a day without a word, and at nightime they would wearily close their eyes and forget that they were companions in misfortune.

It was a moment of harrowing fear. Somehow the end of it appeared not far off. With less concern than at any time during their voyage, they waited for it. Finally, Weston said:

"What's the use of paddling all day? We don't get anywhere, and we may be going farther away from our goal every hour. I'm ready to give up."

"No, no, cousin," protested Otto painfully. "I couldn't sleep or endure this another day without working. Paddling is my only hope."

"I guess you're right," responded Weston with a sigh.

"If we never get out of this," Otto began, with a catch in his voice, "do you think our bodies will ever be discovered?"

"It may be months or a year before anybody happens around here. I've been thinking that we should write a message and inclose it in a bottle. The bottle may float around and some day reach the river."

"It's terrible to think of," Otto responded, "but we should be prepared for the worst. I think I'm getting pretty near my limit."

They sat quiet and thoughtful for some time.

"And yet," Weston said again, "we might be within a few hundred yards of the river. Almost any line of grass ahead may hide from our view just what we're hunting for."

Otto laughed harshly and unpleasantly, the sound of his voice grating on his own ears.

"Haven't we been deluding ourselves with that hope all along?" he said. "I'm tired of it now."

"Yes, so am I, but we've got to hope. It's kept us up until now. I don't think we should laugh at it."

The trying ordeal had affected their nerves, and in a half sullen mood they lapsed back into silence. Somehow every little incident only served to irritate them. Trifles which ordinarily would have called forth pleasant remarks now stirred them to resentment. Their spirits were sore and vexed, weary with the strain, and ready to explode in angry revolt at the slightest excuse.

The restricted diet of fish and birds, with a few hard, stale crackers moistened with a little water, tended to aggravate their condition. Otto lost all appetite, and listlessly turned away from the food his cousin cooked. Weston, half-heartedly, cautioned him to eat to keep up his strength.

For a few days they tried to force their appetite, but the taste of the fresh-water fish nauseated them, and they had to turn away in disgust. The midday sun appeared stronger and hotter than at any previous time, and the navigators, weakened by their slim diet and anxiety, suffered terribly from it.

"I must give up paddling in this sun,"

Otto exclaimed one day, dropping back in his canoe exhausted.

" We should build a shelter for the middle of the day," Weston responded. " We can construct a sort of grass tent over the canoes. It will make our position more comfortable."

It was difficult, however, to find grass stalks strong enough to hold up their strange tent, but by strengthening these supports with their paddles they managed to make a covering of grass plumes over their canoes which shaded them from the midday sun. After that they rested more often in the daytime. Their strength was in reality more responsible for this than the heat of the sun, but neither seemed to realize it.

" I begin to understand something of the feelings of the old Spanish explorers," remarked Otto, as they rested under their shelter of grass plumes and stalks. " If poor deluded Ponce de Leon had a harder time in finding his way through his ' Land of Flowers ' than we are in trying to get out of this watery maze, I pity him."

" It seems to me," replied Weston, " that he'd have called the country ' The Land of Grass and Water,' if he'd been cast away here."

" Or the ' Land of Desolation.' "

" Oh, for that matter, he could have found a dozen appropriate names. What's the matter with ' The Land that's Under Water,' or ' The Land With No Shores ' ?"

" Anything but ' The Land of Flowers,' " replied Otto a little irritably.

" And yet a few days ago you were admiring the vegetation and birds, and stopping every minute to study them," added Weston with an attempt at a smile.

" But that was back in the swamp where we could touch ground when we wanted to; but out here it's nothing but grass and water. I don't believe any civilized being ever drifted down here before."

" Oh, yes, the Indians come here once in awhile."

" Then why don't we see one? I'd rather be captured as a prisoner by the Indians than drift eternally on this sea. I'm getting terribly gloomy and depressed, cousin. Can't we cut straight through the grass until we find a place where we can wade ashore?"

Weston shook his head negatively.

" It would never do," he answered. " We'd never get to the shore, for the swamp grows so dense that we could never find a trail back to the uplands. We'd simply die there. Our only hope is to stick to our boats, and keep on searching for the mouth of the river."

" And be disappointed every day. Well, if you prefer to die this way, I'll stay with you."

" Don't say die yet, Otto. We still have a fighting chance."

The two looked moodily across the shimmering surface of water. They were quiet for some time. Then suddenly a flight of a dozen cranes across the blue sky attracted their attention.

" Look at that!" exclaimed Otto. " I wish we could see more of them."

" They fly as if they had been frightened," Weston answered.

Before the words were scarcely out of his mouth a faint, far-away report of a gun brought a flush of excitement and expectancy to the cheeks of the two boys. They sat upright in their canoes, and stared at each other.

" Was that the report of a gun?" asked Otto, incredulous enough to doubt his own ears.

" Yes, it was a gun."

" Then somebody is —"

With one accord they turned their heads in the direction from which the report appeared to come and raised their voices in a loud, prolonged cry for help. Again and again they shouted, growing almost frantic in their efforts to raise their voices to a higher pitch. Then Weston stopped, and said:

"We must attract their attention with our guns."

He picked up his gun and shot it quickly into the air. Otto grasped his and fired both barrels in quick succession.

"Not too fast," Weston cautioned, loading his empty chamber. "We must shoot singly every minute to direct them toward us. It will be a signal of distress."

"Listen! Did they shoot again?"

"No, it was the ripple of the waves."

Then in a voice that carried a note of terrible anxiety, Otto asked, "Was it really a gun we heard, or were we deceived?"

"I think it was a gun," responded Weston; but there was such doubt and uncertainty in his voice that no conviction was carried with it.

* * *

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE fear that their ears had played them a trick followed so closely upon their excitement at the report of the gun that for a few moments Otto and Weston forgot their signal of distress. They remained silent and motionless in their canoes, listening intently, and hoping almost against hope that the joyful sound in the distance would be repeated. But the great desolate sea of grass and lagoons was as silent as the grave. An occasional ripple of a wave against the sides of the canoes, or a sudden murmur of a puff of wind blowing through the waving tops of the grass, were the only sounds that disturbed the awful calm.

"Why don't you shoot off the gun again?" asked Otto finally. "If you think there's somebody around let them know we are here."

"They know it by this time," replied Weston.

Nevertheless, he shot both barrels of the gun almost simultaneously in the air again, the double explosion breaking the silence like the clap of miniature thunder. Once more they waited and listened.

"If there's anybody around, you'd think he would reply," whispered Otto.

"Not unless he was lost as we are. If it is a plume-hunter or a Seminole, he would be more apt to creep upon us quietly to find out what the trouble was before betraying his position."

"Then you think there is a chance yet?"

"Of course. I don't think I was deceived. That must have been a gun report."

The minutes dragged slowly and heavily along. Occasionally one of the lone watchers discharged his gun into the air, and then renewed the vigil with tense and expectant nerves. A dozen times they shot in the air, but there was still no response to their signals.

"I'm going to shout for help again," Otto finally announced. "They may think we're shooting birds, or fighting."

Raising his voice he called clearly across the winding series of lagoons: "Hell-o-o! H-e-l-p! We're l-o-s-t! H-e-l-p!"

When hoarse from shouting, Weston took up the cry, and it must have been a pretty deaf person who could not have heard the loud calls for assistance anywhere within a mile or two of the boys.

The carrying power of the voice was far greater in that lonely region than either one imagined. To them it seemed as if the voice was muffled and stifled by the great stretches of desolation around, but in reality it traveled easily a mile or two on the wind.

One pair of sharp ears heard it. More than a mile away from them the reports of the guns fired in quick succession startled the lonely man as much as the boys had been electrified by the discharge of his gun. Slowly and cautiously the solitary canoeist paddled along the edge of the saw-grass in the direction of the boys. He stopped frequently to listen to their loud cries for help, but never once did he betray his position by any response.

It must have been half an hour later when the man finally pushed his canoe through a clump of grass stalks, and slowly parting them gazed silently upon the scene. From his hiding place he could not be seen, while he could watch the frantic boys at his leisure. Unconscious of the pair of eyes gazing steadily at them, Weston and Otto continued to call for assistance until too hoarse and exhausted to make further utterance.

"It must have been our imaginations," Otto whispered in despair.

"I was almost sure it was the report of a gun," replied Weston, sitting down in his canoe and staring gloomily at his cousin.

"So was I; but we must have been mistaken."

"It will be harder to endure now than if we had not been promised some help."

"You don't suppose it could have been some Indian, and he's lurking around in the grass?"

"I don't know. Yes! Look over there! Quick!"

Weston leaped to his feet so quickly and suddenly that he nearly tipped his canoe over. Otto, with no more caution, turned around, and actually shipped some water in his boat before he could steady it again.

The cause of their excitement was apparent. Paddling toward them on the lower end of the lagoon was a solitary boatman. The silent watcher had abandoned his hiding place, and was now boldly approaching the boys. At first they could make out nothing definite in his appearance owing to the glittering light of the sun reflected on the water; but in a few minutes Weston said:

"He's an Indian—a Seminole! See his bare arms—"

"It's Osprey Feather!" interrupted Otto with a shout.

Weston, catching a glimpse of the nodding feather of the Seminole, replied: "Yes, yes, you're right, cousin!"

"He's saved us again!" exclaimed Otto in a voice that choked. "Thank God, he's come!"

Then in his excitement he performed the unexpected. Casting off his coat, he plunged into the water, and swam swiftly toward the approaching canoe. The Indian turned an anxious gaze toward the swimming boy, and looked around apparently for the presence of alligators. Weston picked up his paddle, and said:

"Come back, cousin! A 'gator may catch you."

But Otto was deaf to all pleas and threats. He swam toward the approaching canoe, and grasping it on the side he said:

"Help me in, Osprey Feather!"

The Indian balanced his canoe carefully while Otto crawled over the stern. It was a craft not accustomed to violent handling, and Otto nearly tipped it over in his excitement. When he could steady himself and recover his breath, the boy threw his arms around the copper-colored neck of the Indian, and hugged him.

"Oh, you've saved us again!" he said. "You've saved us from a terrible death—worse than death by snake bite. Where did you come from? How did you know we were lost? Did you hear our shouts and our guns? Was it your gun we heard? What were you shooting at?"

All in one breath these queries were flung at the poor Seminole's head, who in true Indian-fashion was striving hard to retain his dignity and self-possession.

"You're worth a dozen white men," continued Otto, in extravagant praise. "You're always around when most needed."

Weston, who had paddled along to meet Osprey Feather, now laughingly interposed:

"Wait, cousin, you've taken Osprey Feather's breath away. Don't you know the Indian's idea of gratefulness is to grunt a few words, and then lapse back into stolid indifference?"

"I don't care what his idea is!" stubbornly replied Otto. "I know we're more grateful than words can express."

"Yes, so we are," replied Weston frankly. "Osprey Feather, you've come in the nick of time. We've been lost here for over a week, and we're nearly discouraged."

"Yes, ready to give up in despair," added Otto. Then in a voice that indicated new alarm, "But suppose Osprey Feather doesn't know the way back to the river? Are you lost, too?"

Weston laughed at the idea of a Seminole getting lost in his natural home environments. Osprey Feather for the first time had a chance to speak.

"Big river over there. Me show white brother the way."

"I knew he would save us!" shouted Otto. "Hurrah for Osprey Feather!"

Once more he deported himself in such an undignified way that there was danger of upsetting the canoe. Weston remonstrated thus:

"See here, cousin, if you want another swim suppose you climb back into your canoe. Osprey Feather isn't anxious for a bath."

Almost a smile flickered on the dusky face of the Indian, but he made no reply to Weston's words. The latter turned to the Indian and asked:

"How did you happen to be out here, Osprey Feather, just at this fortunate time?"

"Me hunt bad white man," was the solemn reply.

A flash of memory recalled to the boys the scene on the banks of the small lake, and they looked inquiringly at the face of the Seminole which appeared slowly to cloud.

"And you haven't found him yet?" added Weston slowly.

The Indian was silent for a few moments. For just an instant a flash of suspicion glinted in his eyes. The boys felt a cold chill pass through them at the sight. Had the Indian found his victim and disposed of him in some cruel, relentless way? This thought occurred simultaneously to the two boys, and their own faces were grave and serious as they waited for the Indian's reply.

"Me find him," slowly responded Osprey Feather after a long pause. "He starving over there."

He indicated with his hand the direction from which he had come.

"He's lost too?" asked Otto and Weston in a breath.

The Indian nodded his head.

"Me find him starving—bad white man. He lost, and paddle round like foolish duck."

"Is he there now?" Weston persisted, as the Indian hesitated.

"He bad white man. Me no help him. He no see Indian, and he starve. He shoot Indian from the back; he no good; better starve to death. Me no help him."

In an instant the tragedy flashed before Weston's mind. The Seminole had hunted down the man, and finding him hopelessly lost in the great swamp he had watched and waited for him to die of starvation and loneliness. The revenge had been complete, for no more terrible death could have happened to the wretch. With all the cunning of his savage race, the Indian had probably watched his victim slowly starving while his own presence was unknown and unguessed.

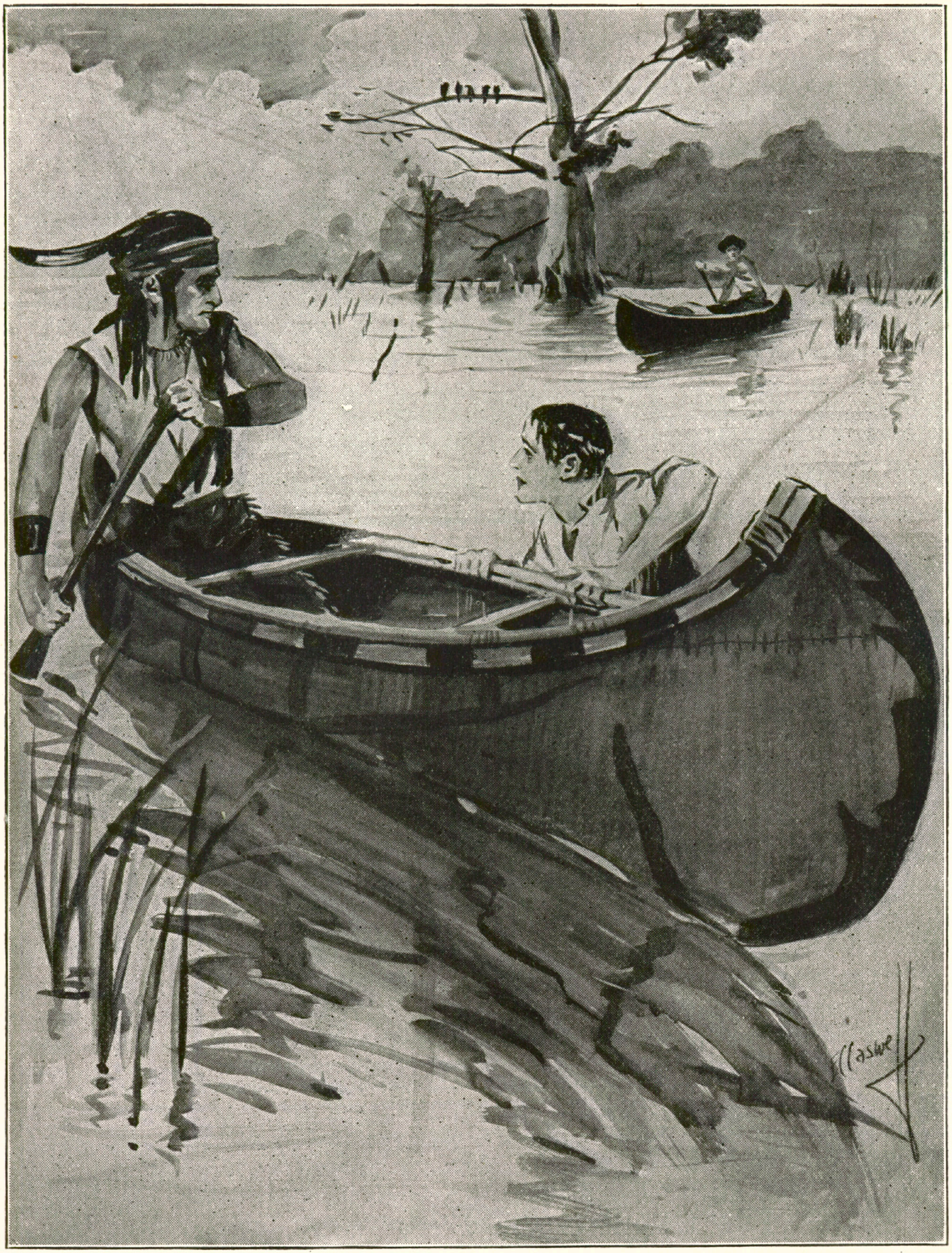
"Is he dead yet?" asked Otto, in a voice that betrayed emotion.

Osprey Feather shook his head negatively.

"He die soon; he starving," he replied slowly.

The boys were conscious of a subtle change in the savage. The eyes restlessly turned away from them, and the features appeared to show agitation. Weston, knowing the nature of the tribe, attributed this to the fear that they would try to rescue the starving man before it was too late. A silence fell between the three. Each one seemed busy with his own thoughts.

Weston finally recovered his voice, and said quietly: "We should go and help the man, Osprey Feather. It is not right to let him starve alone in this great lonely



"HELP ME IN OSPREY FEATHER."

place. Is he too weak to come to us?"

Osprey Feather made no answer. He sat as though turned into stone. Weston knew that a conflict was raging within his breast—a struggle between two contending natures. The call for revenge was wavering before the new sense of duty and pity for the sufferings of another.

Otto watched in silence. He turned away once to conceal his own emotions. His own fearful experience with the terrible loneliness of the desolate place enabled him to picture vividly the sufferings of another. It mattered little that this man had tried to steal one of their canoes, and later had essayed to shoot the Seminole. He was alone now, starving and suffering the agony of a torment worse than death.

" Shall we go to him?" asked Weston, turning once more to the savage seated quietly in his canoe.

A slight spasm crossed the dark face, and the muscles of the bare arms and neck appeared to twitch; but in a perfectly even voice the Indian spoke:

" Me go now. He suffer enough."

Otto grasped the hand of the Indian in sudden warmth. " I knew you would do it," he said quickly. " And I'm glad of it."

Somehow the expression in the boy's face more than the words appealed to the Indian, and he grunted softly a token of dawning intelligence. He was not sure yet that he fully comprehended the motives that influenced the boys, but he knew that they were for disinterested purposes.

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CHAPTER XXVII.

OSPREY FEATHER took the lead and paddled swiftly and silently across the lagoon. The boys found some difficulty in keeping up with him, but the sudden rescue from their perilous condition had brought back their declining strength, and they bent eagerly and steadily to their task. From one lagoon to another, the Indian passed, never once hesitating in his course. The winding streams of water, with their endless rims of saw-grass, offered no puzzle to his savage mind, and with scarcely a glance at his surroundings he paddled onward toward the goal.

It seemed a full two miles from their starting point when Osprey Feather suddenly twisted his light canoe around, and waited for the boys to pull abreast of him. Up to this time he had not spoken. Now he waved his right hand toward the line of grass ahead, and said in his deep, guttural voice:

" Bad man there."

" Is he armed?" asked Weston, remembering his past experience with him.

" He too weak to shoot. He nearly starved."

And so they found him! Lying in the bottom of his canoe, half famished and raving in delirium, the man greeted them with a wild laugh of derision. For days he had been drifting around on the lake among the endless series of lagoons without food or the means to secure it. His gun was empty of cartridges, and there was no sign of any fishing line or tackle. Every crumb of food had been devoured, and the hungry, starving creature had even gnawed at the wild grass roots which he had pulled up from the bottom of the lake.

" We should give him food sparingly," Weston cautioned.

They forced a little food down the throat. The man swallowed with difficulty, and then tasting it he opened his eyes and glared savagely at the boys. The eyes and face were not pleasant to look at. They were disfigured now by the sufferings of the owner, but they had never been very attractive.

Osprey Feather looked on quietly while the boys fed the half-famished man. Then when he slept, Weston turned to the Seminole, and asked:

" How far are we from land, Osprey

Feather, or from the river?"

"Five mile—ten mile from land—two mile from big river."

"Can you direct us to the river then?"

"Me show the way. We take him?"

"Yes," replied Weston, looking at the sleeping man. "We can't leave him here to die."

"Ugh!" grunted the Indian in disgust.

Nevertheless, he took his turn in towing the canoe of the sleeping man as they paddled silently and swiftly toward the Caloosahatchie.

Within an hour they were drifting on the bosom of the river, with the tide slowly sweeping them along toward the natural outlet of the great lake.

"It seems so easy to find a place when you know how to get to it," remarked Otto with a smile, as he saw the unmistakable signs of a strong current flowing between the lines of grass.

"Yes," Weston replied, "very easy, but it's knowing how to get there that makes the difference."

"What are we going to do with this man when he recovers?" asked Otto, looking a little apprehensively at the slumberer.

Weston shrugged his shoulders.

"I suppose we shall have to drop him somewhere. I don't think from his past record that he'll prove very congenial company for us."

"This experience may reform him," ventured Otto. "He certainly wouldn't try to hurt us after we saved him from such a horrible fate."

Osprey Feather did not enter into this conversation, but whenever he looked at the man an expression of crafty suspicion entered his eyes.

"I don't think Osprey Feather will ever trust him again," Weston remarked, noting the Indian's stealthy gaze.

"He bad white man," was the sententious reply of the Indian.

"But bad men are sometimes made good," Otto answered.

For reply the Seminole shook his head doubtfully. He had not yet witnessed such a miracle, and he was not prepared to believe it.

"If only we could find Mr. Murphy's houseboat to-night I think I'd sleep peacefully and contentedly once more," Otto said with a sigh.

Osprey Feather raised his head and looked inquiringly at the speaker.

"The big house that swims?" he asked, after a moment's reflection.

"Yes, the houseboat," replied Otto. "Do you know it?"

"Me know big white hunter. He good. He catch snakes and wild-cat and shut 'em in big house. He hurt no one! he good to Osprey Feather."

"You know him?" exclaimed the boys.

The Indian nodded his head.

"Is he far from here?" asked Weston eagerly.

"Five mile—ten mile—we reach him before moon rise. We paddle hard."

"Yes, paddle hard if we can reach him before night," exclaimed Otto. "I'll paddle until midnight to get there."

"All right. This way; me lead."

Osprey Feather turned the bow of his canoe downstream, and with the boys following, towing behind them the light canoe of the strange man they had rescued, the long pull for the houseboat began. There was no deviation from the straight line which Osprey Feather marked out. Once or twice he led them away from the river to make short cuts around wide bends which cut off several miles of their journey. Silently and steadily they paddled along, not once speaking or changing their positions in the procession. The sun slowly dropped down toward the western horizon. The afternoon waned, and the dusk of early evening appeared along the sides of the river.

The boys were beginning to fear they would not reach the houseboat before dark when, in turning a sharp bend in the river, Otto caught a glimpse of it, and shouted:

"There it is! Hurrah for Mr. Murphy and his houseboat!"

"And a tiger for Osprey Feather!" chimed in Weston.

Waving their paddles in the air, they shouted so persistently that the owner of the houseboat came trotting out on deck to see what new kind of animal had appeared in the swamp.

"There's Mr. Murphy now!" exclaimed both boys in unison.

Then once more they shouted and frantically waved their paddles. It seemed so good to get back after their long journey in the swamp that they were almost delirious with joy and excitement. Osprey Feather watched them narrowly, and with a certain expression of kindliness that made his face look handsome and attractive. But even while he seemed absorbed in their actions, he never once forgot the man in the canoe behind. The noise of the boys had aroused the slumberer, and the Indian saw him raise a head and stare about in a dazed sort of way.

The houseboat was a good half-mile away, and the distance to it could not be covered in less than ten minutes. This brief time gave the awakened man an opportunity to grasp the situation. He felt better, the effect of the food and water having already shown itself. In a few moments he crawled up in the bow of the canoe and seemed to search for something.

If Osprey Feather had been a white man he would have smiled, but coming from a race of savage stoics he simply watched out of the corners of his eyes. He knew that the man was looking for his weapons, and he also knew that they were not in the canoe. In a moment of cautious foresight the Seminole had removed all temptation from the half-starved man.

When they reached the houseboat, Otto shouted:

"We're back again, Mr. Murphy! Can you take us in for a night?"

"Waal, now, ef I was sure ye warn't some kind of wild animal that was dangerous to take aboard I might consider it," replied the old hunter and trapper.

"We're wild enough and hungry enough," Weston called back.

"Ye've set my menagerie a howlin' an' that isn't a good sign," Mr. Murphy continued. "I think they smell danger; they're mighty knowin' critters. But mebbe it's that Indian with ye that they scent."

"Oh, Osprey Feather wouldn't hurt anybody!" Otto spoke up quickly in defense of their dusky companion.

"Osprey Feather! Is that ye? Waal, I reckon there ain't no one who'd say he'll hurt a friend."

To the amazement of the boys, the two shook hands, and then actually embraced each other on the deck of the houseboat.

"Seems to me you're pretty good friends," remarked Weston with a laugh. "We didn't know we were joining two old friends when we picked up Osprey Feather."

"Yes, we're pretty old friends," drawled Mr. Murphy. "There ain't a better friend to have in this whole swamp than Osprey Feather. He's worth about two ordinary white men."

"So we have found out for ourselves," Otto answered. "He's saved our lives twice."

"What have ye in that boat?" interrupted Mr. Murphy, suddenly peering through the gathering dusk at the fourth boat which they had been towing.

"Oh, he's a half-starved man we picked up in the swamp. We'll tell you about him later."

"H'm;" grunted Mr. Murphy. "He seems a little better, I reckon, than he did. He ducked his head pretty lively when I looked at him."

"We admit he isn't an angel," Otto said, "but he's had a hard time of it, and we had to bring him along. I'd like to get rid of him as soon as he's recovered. I don't like him—and I don't think Osprey Feather has any great love for him."

The Indian shook his head.

"Waal, we'll feed him up, and give him a fresh start," Mr. Murphy added. "There's something 'bout his face that seems familiar to me, but I can't say where I've seen it."

The canoe was drawn up alongside of the houseboat, and the man was invited aboard. At first his sullen face remained hidden from view. He evidently recognized his rescuers, and he preferred to feign a weakness that would excuse him from any explanation.

When helped on board and given a comfortable bed in one of Mr. Murphy's staterooms, he quickly recovered his strength and powers of observation. The strange houseboat and its occupants aroused his curiosity. He examined the sides of his room, tested them with his hands, and then looked cautiously out of the window. It was a beautiful evening, and the man seemed to measure the distance from his windowsill to the water below.

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CHAPTER XXVIII.

MEANWHILE, the others were engaged in preparing their supper in the small kitchen of the houseboat, or rather Mr. Murphy prepared and cooked it, while Otto and Weston looked on and talked, and Osprey Feather remained calmly silent and observant in his corner. Once or twice the Indian raised his head and listened intently. The boys were too eagerly reciting their adventures to notice the Indian's peculiarities; but the owner of the houseboat shifted his eyes occasionally from his stove in the corner to where the Seminole stood.

Once in the midst of the conversation, Mr. Murphy addressed him in an undertone. Osprey Feather glided out of the room and returned a few minutes later to resume his silent vigil.

"And ye say this poor man was starvin'?" asked Mr. Murphy, when they reached the point in the narrative where Osprey Feather rescued the unknown.

"I guess he would have died within a few more hours," Otto answered. "He was pretty weak when we met him."

"But he looks pretty well now, and he doesn't seem a bit thankful. I went in there a few moments ago, and he was sullen and morose."

"Maybe he's hungry, like the rest of us," Otto answered.

"Then take this in to him; he may talk to you, an' tell you what his business may be down here."

"All right. That ought to cheer up anybody, and make him talk."

With a smack of his lips, Otto breathed in the odor of the fragrant dinner, and walked away with it. When he reached the sick man's room, he knocked, and said:

"Here's supper. Ready for it?"

The man stretched out a hand to take it. Otto stood a moment to see him enjoy the meal. He was ravenously hungry and devoured the food with avidity. After a prolonged silence, the man asked:

"Whose boat is this, my boy, and what's it doing way down here in the swamp?"

"It belongs to Mr. Murphy," Otto replied. "He's collecting live wild animals and birds for some menagerie."

"Think he had a menagerie here the way they growl and fight," grumbled the man, renewing his eating.

"Yes, they are pretty noisy sometimes," laughed Otto, "but they're all kept in stout cages."

"What are you boys doing down here?" abruptly asked the man.

"Fishing, hunting, and having a good time," was Otto's non-committal reply. Then considering it his turn to ask questions, he said:

"You haven't told us your name yet, nor

what you're doing down here. Weston says you don't look like a hunter, and—"

"Who said I was?" growled the man.

"Nobody; but what else can a man do down here except hunt?"

"Can't he come down here for his health or pleasure, or just to look round and explore the country?"

"Yes, I suppose so; but it's rather an unattractive part of the world for pleasure or health."

The man looked suspiciously at him, and then said:

"Who's that Indian with you?"

"Osprey Feather—a great friend of ours, and a great chief of his tribe."

"Is he going to stay here long?"

"I haven't asked him yet but he's welcome to stay as long as he pleases. Mr. Murphy likes him, and—"

"Then I'm going to leave. I don't like Indians—never did. They make me shiver. I guess I read too much about them when a boy."

"But Osprey Feather is harmless unless you hurt him first, and then I'd want to keep away from him."

Otto smiled as he said this, and when he noted the man's scowl he enjoyed the situation.

"I don't suppose you ever met him before?" he continued.

"I? Oh, no, I never met anybody in the swamp until I woke up and found you towing my boat. I was half dead then. It was terrible in that swamp of grass—nothing but water and grass. I never want to see it again."

"Neither do I," replied the boy emphatically.

"You were lost, too, then?"

"Yes, for more than a week."

"Ugh! It's a terrible place. But this river takes you away from it? If you float down on it you will come to civilization again, won't you?"

"Yes, the river empties into the Gulf."

The man emptied the plate of every particle of food. In a more friendly voice he added:

"See here, my boy, I want to leave this boat to-night. I'm tired of this swamp. I don't want to meet that Indian again, or your Mr. Murphy. Now, if you'll get me some provisions to carry with me, I'll pay you—yes, give you good money for it."

The man placed his hand in his shirt and drew out a big roll of bills. Otto looked astonished, and said nothing. The man grinned.

"Didn't think I had so much? Well, a few of those bills belong to you if you will get me enough food to keep me until I can get out of this swamp."

"I'll ask Mr. Murphy," promptly replied Otto.

The man scowled; he was evidently displeased by this answer.

"I don't want you to say anything to him," the man continued in a persuasive voice. "It's this way, my boy, that Indian and me have met before, and we're not friends. It's better for us to separate without any further trouble. I'm willing to leave to-night. Mr. Murphy is his friend, and he might object. And then—"

Otto watched the man, and waited for him to finish his threatening sentence; but an unpleasant laugh was all that he could be induced to add.

"I think I must be going," Otto finally said. "I'm pretty hungry myself, and supper's ready."

"You won't say anything about this to them," the strange man suddenly said, jerking a finger over his shoulder.

"Why not?" Otto replied. "If you want to leave us I don't think anybody will object. I believe the best way is to present your request to Mr. Murphy."

The man sprang to his feet and growled. "If you do, my boy, I'll punish you! Beware now!"

Otto faced him unflinchingly.

"You don't do well to threaten on this boat," he answered back boldly. "I certainly shall lay the whole matter before Mr. Murphy now."

The man's face twitched, and his hands fumbled nervously around his belt as if he expected to find a weapon there. Then a smile spread over his face, and with extended hand, he added in a friendly voice:

"I was only fooling, my boy. I was once an actor, and at times I can't resist the temptation to act the character of another. I was the villain in a play so long that it comes natural to me to assume the character sometimes. I see I deceived you. Well, let it pass at that, and shake hands. I have no desire to keep anything from Mr. Murphy or your Indian friend. Tell them everything. I'm going to stay here until to-morrow, if you will let me, and then leave you all with my best wishes. I'm sure you have all been so kind to me that I owe you a debt of gratitude."

Otto stood nonplussed for an instant, completely taken by surprise, and unable to fathom the man's sudden change of demeanor. Then the truth flashed across his mind. The man was now playing the part of an actor; before he was his natural self.

"I should think," Otto said slowly, with contempt in his voice, "that you might make a pretty good villain."

"Yes, people always said I did," was the suave manner, "and I think if I ever get out of this swamp alive I'll go back to my profession."

"It might be wise," Otto responded, walking out of the room, "for this swamp is a dangerous place for villains, either real or pretenders."

He caught a gleam of mockery in the eyes of the man as he closed the door, but it was impossible to conclude whether the words of the boy had angered him.

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CHAPTER XXIX.

OTTO found the others waiting for him at the rude table where their host had spread the steaming viands, and, forgetting the altercation with the strange guest of the houseboat, he joined them in eating. Not until their appetites were partly satisfied did it occur to the boy to relate the substance of his interview. When he finished Mr. Murphy shook his head, and remarked:

"I knew he was a bad man. I know his face. I've seen it somewhere."

While he frowned under the mental effort to recall his memory of names and faces, Osprey Feather suddenly walked toward the door, and disappeared without warning. A silence fell upon the others, for each one anticipated the return of the Seminole to report his observations. They knew his distrustful nature was responsible for many of his catlike, watchful visits to the strange man's room.

When he did not return within a few minutes, Mr. Murphy rose from his seat. "I think I'll look round on deck a bit," he said quietly.

But if he expected to disarm the others of all suspicion he was mistaken, for Weston and Otto promptly followed him.

When all three emerged from the kitchen, they were startled by a shadow gliding toward them. It came so rapidly, and halted so close to them, that they involuntarily stepped back a pace. But the nodding plume of the osprey quickly quieted their fears.

"Bad man gone," Osprey Feather grunted. "He take all boats. Cut them adrift. No see them anywhere."

Mr. Murphy made an exclamation that was very emphatic for him. Otto and Weston stood silent and puzzled.

"We must catch him some way!" exclaimed Mr. Murphy finally. "He's a bad one, and he'll get his rewards for this!"

"Me know how," Osprey Feather once more grunted. "Follow him down the river. He go that way."

Without waiting for the others to second this proposition, the Indian turned toward the shore-end of the houseboat, and jumped noiselessly to the embankment. Otto and Weston immediately followed. Mr. Murphy remained behind to watch for any possible return of the man to the houseboat.

Within a few moments the two boys found they had a difficult task to keep pace with the Indian. In the darkness he seemed to glide silently and swiftly from tree to tree, jumping across the wet, marshy places with the skill and ease of a deer, and always keeping several yards ahead. They followed the edge of the river closely so that the moonlight made their path plainer than if they had plunged directly into the shadows of the dense swamp.

Weston was an expert hunter, and he made a desperate effort to keep pace with Osprey Feather, but he soon panted and groaned under his exertions. Otto from the first was hopelessly left in the rear, but he knew the general direction they took and he kept persistently and doggedly on the trail.

Half a mile or more down the river Osprey Feather suddenly stopped. He stood on the extreme edge of a sandbar that ran half across the river at one of the sharp bends. Instantly the two boys saw the scheme of the Indian. He knew of this strategical point, and he had hurried down the river to reach it ahead of the fleeing man.

When the three stood on the point of land, they silently watched the river in either direction. Had the man passed this point? This question seriously concerned them, and they waited for some time for an answer. Osprey Feather first caught the dip of paddles in the stream. He raised his head to listen, and then grunted:

"He come down river soon."

This prediction proved accurate enough, for in the path of the moonlight a dark patch suddenly appeared, which as it drew closer took the shape of a man paddling a canoe. Confident that he could not be pursued, the man was paddling deliberately, aiding the tide only with an occasional stroke of his paddle. He had cut loose all of the small boats, and he knew that his pursuers could not start on his trail until they had recovered them. This, in the darkness, would be no easy task.

The thought of following him along the shore of the river had apparently never entered his mind. Therefore, it was with extreme astonishment that he suddenly looked up and saw something moving out from the shore toward his boat. At first he took it for a log, and then as it did not drift with the tide he concluded it was the head of a big alligator. Having a wholesome dread of these creatures, he turned to strike at it with his paddle.

But Osprey Feather was an excellent swimmer, and Weston was not much behind him. Before the man realized that he was face to face with his pursuers, one was on either side of his canoe. When he struck at Weston, Osprey Feather caught the opposite side of the boat, and tipping it over, precipitated the man head-first into the river.

Otto stood on the end of the sandbar ready to go to the assistance of either one. He held his gun in his hand for an emergency should the stranger succeed in escaping from his two pursuers.

But there was no occasion for his interference. The struggle which followed in the water was desperate but brief. When the man tumbled overboard he disappeared from sight in the muddy river, and when his head came to the surface again Osprey Feather and Weston pounced upon him. At first the struggle in the water made Otto anxious about the fate of his cousin and Osprey Feather; but when they swam toward the shore dragging their half-drowned victim between them he understood their ruse. By holding the desperate thief's head under water until the fight was all taken out of him they had made an easy victory.

Otto waded into the river to help them land their burden. The half-unconscious man was quickly bound, and then, with another one of his significant grunts, the Indian quietly slipped back into the water.

"Where is he going?" asked Otto in surprise.

"After the canoe, I suppose," answered Weston, puffing and blowing from his own exertions.

The Indian swam with powerful and easy strokes downstream, and caught up with the overturned canoe just as it was disappearing round another bend in the river. He swam ashore with the craft, turned it over, and then swiftly paddled back to Otto and Weston.

"Bad man needs watching," was his short remark as he saw the evil eyes of their victim staring at them. "Me take him back to big house."

"Not alone," said Weston doubtfully.

"Me no afraid; he get killed if he rise."

There was a dangerous movement of the Indian's hand toward his belt, and the two boys understood.

There was no room for a third one in the canoe, and after the bound prisoner was helped aboard Osprey Feather paddled out into the river and turned the bow of the boat upstream.

Otto and Weston picked up their guns and retraced their steps along the bank of the river. When they reached the houseboat, Mr. Murphy was there anxiously waiting for them.

"Did you find him?" was his first words.

To which question Weston responded: "We've sent him back in the boat he stole. Hasn't Osprey Feather returned yet?"

"No, but I think I hear his paddle. Yes, that is a boat coming around the bend."

Like a phantom out of the night, the canoe glided swiftly and noiselessly toward them. They hailed it, but the Indian ventured no reply. He was a man of few words, but his acts were always to the point.

"I guess we'll give him a different room ter sleep in this time," remarked the owner of the houseboat, as they pulled the helpless man aboard. "I always thought I'd get some fine animal to fill that new cage I built last month."

There was a twinkle in the eyes. When they followed him down the corridor of the houseboat, they understood its meaning. Mr. Murphy opened an iron-barred cage designed for one of his forest captives, and when the prisoner was placed inside, and the door locked, he was as safe as if the iron door of some jail had closed behind him. They cut the rope that bound his arms and legs and left him at liberty within his narrow six-by-six cage.

"I guess he'll stay there till we can find a better place for him," remarked the owner of the craft.

Osprey Feather grunted with satisfaction, but Otto, knowing the man's capacity for evil doing, said:

"You don't think he can break through there, Mr. Murphy?"

"If he can he's welcome to go scot free."

Meanwhile, the rest of the boats had been drifting downstream. Osprey Feather had seen no signs of them on his return to the houseboat, and it was quite necessary that they should be recovered before they were lost for good. Osprey Feather, as usual, volunteered to undertake to hunt for them, but the two boys protested.

"I'm going with you," Weston announced.

And I want to do something, too," Otto added. "Why not let me go with Osprey Feather? You had the swim in the river after the man, cousin, and it's my turn to do something."

"Well, go ahead," replied Weston. "I know it will be an all-night's job, and I want some sleep before morning."

But under the skillful management of the Indian it proved to be a much less difficult task than anticipated. He knew the force and direction of the current of the river, and he quickly paddled down the stream, beyond the point where they had met the man, before making a systematic search for the boats. Then skirting the shore where the current ran the swiftest he watched sharply for any signs of the drifting canoes.

Within an hour their search was rewarded. One was found tangled in the overhanging vines and tree branches, and the others were bunched close together in midstream, floating quietly and calmly toward the Gulf of Mexico. They picked them up, and returned to the houseboat with their trophies of the hunt trailing behind them.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE following morning, Mr. Murphy examined the prisoner more closely by daylight. The feeling that he had seen the man somewhere before still possessed him, and with the hope of refreshing his memory he tried to engage him in conversation. But the prisoner was gruff and disinclined to converse. In vain the old hunter essayed to draw him out, asking him questions kindly and without apparent design. Finally the prisoner burst forth, and exclaimed:

" See here, old man, if you'll stop questioning me, and give me my freedom, with a boat and provisions for three days, I'll tell you all you want to know."

" Ef ye'll tell me beforehand, I might consider yer request," promptly replied Mr. Murphy. " Now where have I seen ye?"

" Nowhere," was the bluff answer. " You think I look like some friend of yours, but I don't."

" No, ye don't look like any friend of mine, but ye do look—"

He stopped a moment, and stared blankly through the bars of the cage. Otto and Weston appeared at this moment, and saw the two glaring at each other like two enemies. Suddenly Mr. Murphy turned around sharply, and muttered:

" That's it. I knew I had seen that face. I'll find out."

" Who is it—an old friend of yours, Mr. Murphy?" asked Weston with a smile.

" Wait a moment," was all the reply the old hunter returned.

He brushed past the boys, and was gone for some time. When he returned he held an old newspaper in his hand. He stared first at this, and then at the man.

" Isn't that your picture, Mr.—Mr. Jim Leroy?"

He thrust the paper near the cage. On the front page was a large picture of an escaped convict. One glance at it sufficed to show the wonderful likeness.

" Let me see it," gasped the two boys in a breath.

" Jim Leroy, escaped convict," read Weston aloud, " and a reward of five thousand dollars offered for his capture. Why, Mr. Murphy, where did you get this paper? Surely they don't deliver your mail down here in the swamp?"

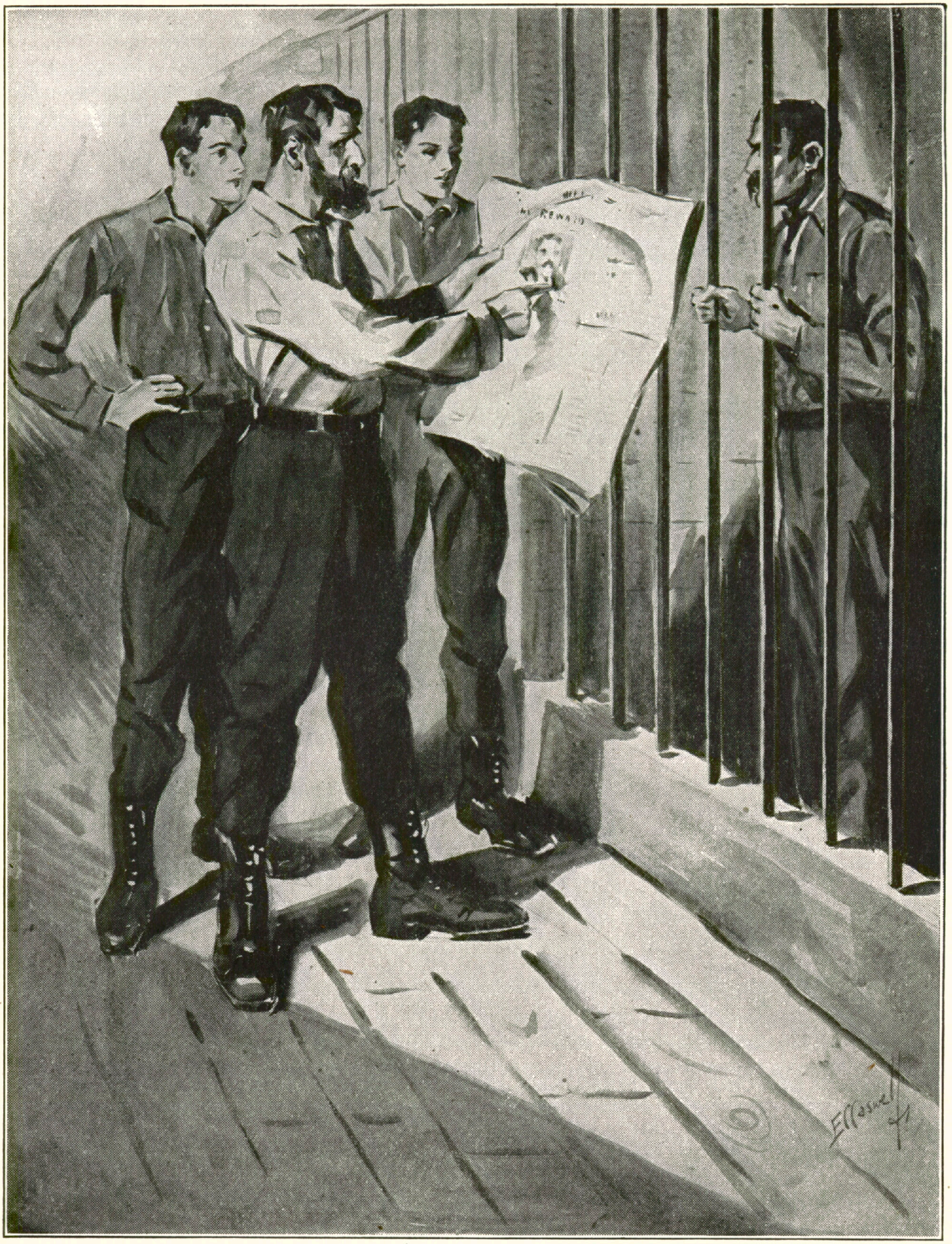
" Look at the date," replied the hunter; " it's a month old. This man has been a month in this swamp, hiding away from the officers."

" There's no doubt about it," replied Weston. " It's a perfect likeness of him. What was his crime? Forgery and attempted murder. Well, I can believe it."

" I guess he'd commit another crime to get out of that cage," said Otto, surveying the scowling face of the prisoner.

The man laughed harshly and brutally. " Oh, you think you'll get that reward," he said, not even attempting to deny that he was the escaped convict referred to. " Well, I'll give you a chase for your money. You haven't got me down the river yet."

" No, sir," sternly replied Mr. Murphy, " but I'll give ye my word of honor that we'll get ye there. I've carried a good



"ISN'T THAT YOUR PICTURE, MR.—MR. JIM LEROY?"

many wild beasts on this boat, an' I never lost one yet. An' I don't intend ter begin now."

Something in the sternness of the man impressed the prisoner, for he scowled and refused to say more. Osprey Feather stood by the group now, and Otto turned enthusiastically toward him.

" We've got a valuable prisoner, Osprey Feather," he said. " He's escaped from prison, and a big reward is offered for his capture. You deserve a good deal of it. He's a treacherous, tricky fellow, and we must watch him closely."

" He bad man," answered the Indian, unmoved by these remarks. " Me watch him."

And true to his word the Indian scarcely relaxed his vigil an hour when they started downstream. Only for short intervals could the rest of the crew induce him to sleep and rest. Like a faithful watchdog he rested continually before the door of the cage, and the prisoner could hardly move in his cage without attracting the attention of the savage.

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CHAPTER XXXI.

WHEN the houseboat started on its trip down the river. Weston suddenly found himself confronted by the old problem which had brought them so far into the swamp. The thought of complete failure now made him quiet and morose. The excitement of the past week had temporarily banished from his mind all thought of his mission; but it came back to him with alarming terror. Their trials and sufferings had so far proved of little avail.

The following day Weston said to his cousin: " Otto, we've failed in our mission, and I hate to return without accomplishing anything."

" But there's nothing we can do," replied Otto, fearing lest his cousin intended to leave the houseboat for another hopeless search in the swamp.

" Yes, there is," doggedly answered Weston. " We must appeal to the Indians in some way. I've been thinking that Osprey Feather might lead me to their chief. You could go on down the river with Mr. Murphy, and I could get off somewhere with Osprey Feather —"

" No, no, I won't desert you; if you leave I go too," interrupted Otto, but with an expression of disappointment in his voice.

" That wouldn't be necessary," replied his cousin. " I could do it alone."

Otto looked somewhat dubiously at the fringe of tropical trees and plants on the left bank of the river. For a moment he was quiet and thoughtful. He had no desire to get lost again in such a tangle of trees, vines, grass and water, but he could not desert his cousin even though death faced them.

" Why not see if Mr. Murphy couldn't explain the matter to Osprey Feather so he would understand?" he asked suddenly, looking up hopefully. " Then Osprey Feather could reach his people, and do more good than if you went to their chief."

" I'm going to have a long talk with him," Weston replied, " but that won't relieve us of the responsibility. I shall accompany Osprey Feather to his people."

But when the whole story of their mission and adventures were related to Mr. Murphy, and he in turn had unfolded to Osprey Feather the meaning of the surveyor's stakes in the swamp, events shaped themselves somewhat unexpectedly. Osprey Feather was silent and uncommunicative as usual. Even Mr. Murphy could not get any word of promise from him. He simply shrugged his shoulders and grunted in true Indian fashion.

Then two days later they reached a part of the Caloosahatchie where it broadened into a mighty stream. The first clearing of white settlers appeared on the north bank. This sign of civilization appealed to Otto, who enthusiastically called attention to it. Ordinarily Weston would have welcomed the sign with equal pleasure, but now he felt that he was being carried too far from the scene of his work.

" Where's Osprey Feather?" he asked Mr. Murphy suddenly. " If he isn't going to do anything I must start off alone again."

The old hunter smiled. " Our Indian friend is not aboard," he said.

" Not aboard!" exclaimed the two boys. " Where is he then?"

" Ask the alligators, or the birds," was the quiet answer. " Who knows where an Indian is when he once gets out of sight?"

" Then he's deserted us—left us without any word?"

" Not exactly," replied the hunter. " I suspected as much. Last night he said to me that his people were callin' him, an' he had to go back."

" And that was all?" queried Weston.

" No, he said that his white brothers need not worry; he would help them."

" You mean he will help us about the survey?" asked Weston eagerly.

" That is what I understood him to mean. Yes, Osprey Feather will do anything for those he likes. I shouldn't worry any more about the matter for the present."

" I don't know," Weston said softly. " He might have meant something else."

Mr. Murphy placed an arm on his shoulder, and said:

" My dear boy, the ways of an Indian are subtle an' past findin' out, but ye can trust 'em. I've been in this swamp for many years, an' my best friends have been the Seminoles. Osprey Feather likes ye, an' he feels that ye saved his life. He'll leave no stone unturned until he has accomplished what ye wish. But ye must let him work it out in his own way. To follow him would do no good."

" But he doesn't realize the necessity of hurrying," Weston protested further. " If the stakes are not replaced this month, father will be ruined. He will lose all. His two winters' work will count for nothing."

" I explained all that to Osprey Feather."

Weston sighed heavily; he could not accept the situation quietly. But after a few moments of thought he looked up more brightly, and said:

" Well, there's nothing to do except wait. I'll try to contain my feelings until we get to Fort Myers."

" Yes, ye must go there to help me with this prisoner," responded Mr. Murphy.

The wind favored them the next day, and the big canvas sail of the houseboat was spread to catch the steady breezes that wafted them down the river. The indications of civilization multiplied. They passed several clearings in the woods, and the white gleam of a house between the lines of trees made Otto exclaim:

" There's somebody's home at last!"

Then proceeding to hum softly, " Home, Sweet Home," he paced up and down the deck of the houseboat. Weston, who was still too absorbed to appreciate his spirit of happiness, smiled at his enthusiasm, but did not join in it.

The cargo of wild animals, birds and reptiles kept them from getting lonely. They were ravenous eaters despite their captivity, and it required a good deal of labor to feed and water them properly. Mr. Murphy had provided for their physical comfort, and there was an abundance of food aboard.

They took turns visiting the prisoner in his cage. Several times he made overtures to Otto, hoping to play upon his sympathies by a tale of discouragement and hard luck; but Otto had little to say in reply. The hypocrisy of the man convinced the boy that little he could do would prove of any avail in softening the hardened character of the convict. The best thing for all concerned was to let the law take its course.

Once, indeed, the man received a rather

severe shock which calmed his turbulent and unruly nature. One side of his cage was built of wood, the other three being heavily barred with steel grating. During the night, the convict cut with a broken knife half way through this wooden partition. But he never quite got through. A sudden shriek in the early morning alarmed the crew of the houseboat.

Rushing to the cage from whence the cry came, the three were confronted by a unique spectacle. Crouching at the further end of his cage, with eyes bulging and hands trembling, was the prisoner, while opposite through a slight opening in the wooden partition, which he had worked so industriously all night to cut, protruded the head of an immense diamond-back rattlesnake. For an instant the three spectators stared in surprise at the frightened man. Then Mr. Murphy laughed heartily.

"Ye'd like ter escape in the rattlesnake's cage, would ye?" he said between paroxysms of mirth.

"Take him away!" shouted the terrified man. "Quick, take him away!"

"Don't see why I should touch him ter save ye," was the quiet rejoinder. "Ye cut through ter find him. Now ye got him fur a companion."

The man groaned and turned deathly white. Whenever the snake wagged his head or sounded his warning rattle, the convict shuddered as though suffering from chills and fever.

Otto and Weston took in the situation after a moment's investigation. The wooden partition separated the man's cage from a dozen rattlesnakes, which the old hunter had captured in the woods. Angered and irritated by their confinement, they were ready to wage war upon any enemy within striking distance.

"Fortunately it was the biggest fellow that tried ter crawl through that hole," Mr. Murphy finally said, "an' he's got stuck. He can't get his body through. Ef it had been one of the smaller ones now, we would have a dead prisoner here."

"Oh!" groaned the man, "won't you take him away!"

Mr. Murphy secured one of his patent nooses fastened to the end of a long pronged stick, and after a few minutes of manipulation he managed to jerk the snake back through the hole. Then throwing the prisoner a piece of board, with a hammer and some nails, he said:

"Now ye can patch up that hole if ye want ter, but I wouldn't try to get out of that cage again. The next time ye'll tumble into the alligators' pen."

The prisoner closed up the hole with the board so quickly that the snakes had no further opportunity to wriggle a head through it, and when the work was finished he sat down and wiped the cold perspiration from his brow.

"I guess he ain't goin' ter try to get out again," remarked the hunter, as they walked up on deck.

This prophecy was fulfilled. They had no further trouble with the man, and a few days later, when they landed him at Fort Myers and delivered him over to the authorities, the prisoner sighed with relief to escape alive from such a floating ark. The experience with the rattlesnakes had completely tamed him.

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CHAPTER XXXII.

THE work of unloading and shipping the wild creatures North was as unique as trapping them, and the boys stayed three days with the old hunter to help him. Their services were of little real value, for the man had everything reduced to a system, and he boxed and shipped his menagerie with comparative ease. There was no hurry or worry in his movements, and each step was taken with deliberate forethought and calculation.

When Otto and Weston finally announced their intention to leave him, the brow of the hunter darkened a trifle, and he said:

"I s'pose ye must be goin', but I hate ter part with ye. Somehow, never havin' had any boys of my own, ye've sort of made me feel lonesomelike. I ain't goin' ter lose sight of ye."

"Indeed, you're not, Mr. Murphy," responded Weston. "You're coming up often to see us. Before you go back to the swamp you must pay my father a visit."

"Yes, for there's the matter of this reward. We're goin' ter divide it into four shares, an' I'll come up to give ye half of it."

It was really an affectionate parting, for the old swamp hunter had endeared himself to the boys by his many simple, kindly acts, while they on their part had won something more than the respect of Mr. Murphy.

The journey back home from Fort Myers was too prosaic and conventional to need describing, for it was made by railroad and on mule-back through parts of the state settled by fruit-growers, and they never once got beyond the range of cultivated orange groves or truck farms. Otto, contrasting the present with the past, shrugged his shoulders, and remarked to his cousin:

"I think, Weston, I like this better than the swamp. I wasn't cut out for an adventurous life in such a lonely part of the world."

"Then you don't want to go up the river again with Mr. Murphy?" queried Weston.

"Oh, yes, that's different! He carries his house with him, and that's the way I like to travel."

Weston made no reply, but jogged along on his mule until suddenly a glimpse of a gray house in the distance caught his eyes.

"Here we are at last!" he shouted. "Home again!"

Otto took up the echo, and then in one of the most remarkable mule races of the age they vied with each other to reach the house in advance—a race, by the way, which ended in the inglorious defeat of Otto and with a sad climax for Weston, for his mule stopped so suddenly that he was allowed to continue over his neck until a hedge of privet stopped further progress. Otto slid from his mule's back to prevent a similar accident to himself, willingly yielding the honor of winning to his cousin.

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A few days later the two boys once more stood on the edge of the swamp. Otto was fishing as usual, and Weston was joyously proclaiming a new discovery.

"It's all right, Otto!" he shouted. "The survey stakes are all back in their places. Osprey Feather is a trump! He's served us a good turn that I can never forget. He's saved father from ruin. Nobody but an Indian could replace those stakes without great trouble and expense."

"Then's he's been around here lately," Otto replied, looking curiously about. "Suppose he should be—"

Weston followed his cousin's wondering gaze, and then with a sudden gasp they started on a dead run through the swamp. The unmistakable appearance of a nodding osprey plume above the tops of the vines and bushes was responsible for this action. Standing quietly before them, with arms folded across his chest, and eyes shining with a welcome light, was their Seminole friend.

"Osprey Feather!" they shouted in a breath, and then flinging themselves upon the Indian they nearly suffocated him with their violent embraces.

"Me glad!" the Indian remarked, finally, when they gave him a chance to speak. "Me glad. Sticks no more wrong. Osprey Feather see they are right. Indians no touch them more."

Before the cousins could further express their gratitude, the bushes back of the Indian moved, and Mr. Murphy stepped forward to the utter amazement of the boys. He was smiling pleasantly, and both hands were extended.

"I planned this little meeting with Osprey Feather," he said. "I knew ye would come down here ter see if the stakes were replaced. Osprey Feather wanted ter put them back in their places and then vanish into the swamp again. But I knew ye would want ter see him."

"Want to see him again!" exclaimed Weston. "We want to keep him. He can't give us the slip this time. He must come up to the house."

"Indeed you must!" Otto added. "Uncle Winthrop returns from Washington to-morrow, and he must see you."

"Me glad, but me must go," protested Osprey Feather.

"Not if we can drag you up there," interposed Mr. Murphy, "fur we've got some business ter settle. I haven't told ye of the good things comin' ter ye fer catchin' that convict."

"He bad man," replied the Indian, glancing around apprehensively.

"Yes, but all white men are not bad men, Osprey Feather," Mr. Murphy said very gently.

For an instant the Seminole looked mutely at the speaker, and then answered with sudden warmth of feeling:

"No, some good—very good. You all friend of Osprey Feather."

"Yes, we're all your friends," replied Weston, taking the Indian by the arm. "Now come up to my house until I prove it. We'll all have a good time together and welcome father home to-morrow. It will all be a big surprise to him—and a pleasant one."

Somewhat reluctantly at first, but gradually with less resistance, Osprey Feather permitted the three to drag him up from the swamp to where the orange blossoms and the wild rose spread their perfume, and as his lagging footsteps carried him past the new signs of civilization of the white man his mind forgot its prejudice and dwelt upon the good that he saw about him. He had known the white men in the swamp; he was now to know them in their home. And his thoughts were keen and pleasant, for he was with friends whom he knew he could trust implicitly!

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